



THE TALES OF
Book VII
MARIELLE CLARAC

*The Holy Crown
of Marielle Clarac*

Author: Haruka Momo Illustrator: Maro

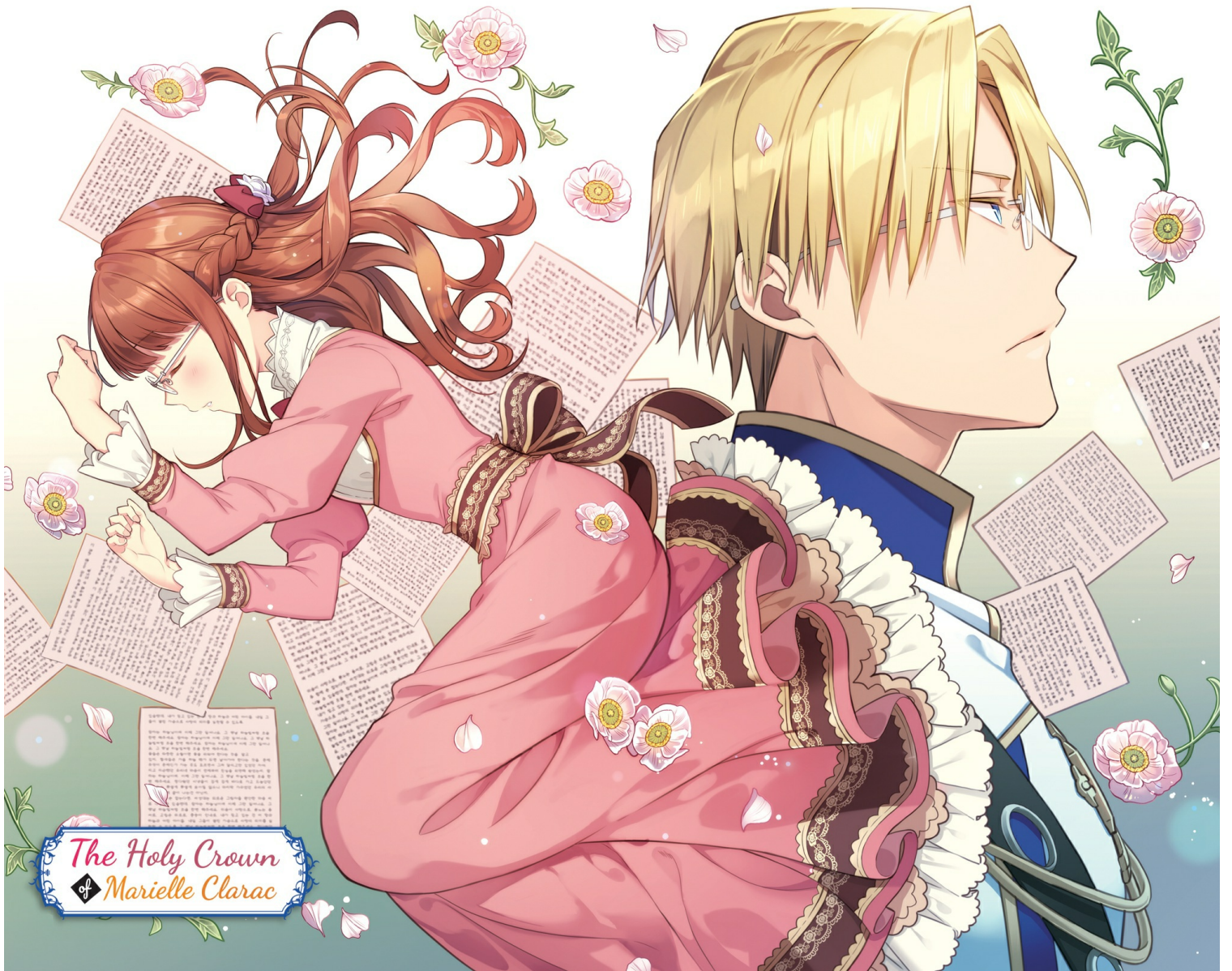
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☼ Julianne Silvestre (née Sorel)

18 years old. Marielle's best friend and an avid reader who likes a rather specific type of content. Engaged to Prince Severin after being adopted into House Silvestre.

☼ Adrien Flaubert

24 years old. A naval officer and the middle son of House Flaubert.

☼ Noel Flaubert

15 years old. The youngest son of House Flaubert. Appears at first glance to have a sweet and angelic disposition.

☼ Alain Lisnard

A lieutenant and Simeon's aide. Although born a commoner, he is a highly skilled knight who graduated from the military academy with top marks.

☼ Marquess Rafale

An influential figure in parliament and head of the reformist faction. Passionately focused on his political work and still single. Has a keen sense of justice.

☼ Lutin

An internationally notorious thief. He exclusively targets nobles and the wealthy, so the lower classes see him as a hero. Keenly interested in Marielle.

☼ Prince Gracius

Heir to the throne of the Republic of Orta (formerly the Kingdom of Orta). Was exiled to Linden shortly after his birth.

☼ Hector Mereaux

A cunning and ruthless Ortan operative known as the Silver Fox. Has a grudge against Marielle and Simeon.

Marielle Flaubert

19 years old. Daughter of Viscount Clarac, now married to Simeon. Has brown hair and brown eyes, and wears glasses. Entirely plain, with no real distinguishing qualities. Can suppress her presence, hiding in plain sight to observe people and gather information. Secretly a popular author called Agnès Vivier.





Simeon Flaubert

Marielle's dashing 28-year-old husband. Heir to House Flaubert, an esteemed earldom. Vice Captain of the Royal Order of Knights. Highly skilled, but with a tendency to be too serious and inflexible. He is respected and feared by his men, but Marielle brings out a very different side of him. Has pale blond hair and light blue eyes.

Severin Hugues de Lagrange

27 years old. Crown Prince of the Kingdom of Lagrange and Simeon's closest friend since childhood. Beautiful in a masculine way, with black hair and dark eyes. When Marielle's around, his usual princely solemnity goes out the window.

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Chapter One

My first foray into society occurred in the spring of the year I turned fifteen.

When girls from upper-class families reach marriageable age, the time comes for them to dress up beautifully and show themselves off before great numbers of people. Naturally, the primary goal of this is to find a husband. Though marriage is essentially arranged by a girl's parents, families still need to make it clear which girls are on the market. Society is the place for the contenders to show off all their achievements: their beauty and charm, their refinement and cultivation, and their flair for the art of conversation.

By attending all sorts of social gatherings, people develop new connections and exchange information. This includes discussion of unmarried young ladies, which in turn leads to marriages being arranged. Even if the young man and woman concerned don't find each other on their own, they're often introduced by common acquaintances. For this reason, it's necessary for a young lady to make her existence known to as many people as possible, in order to generate interest.

First impressions are everything, so a debut requires working especially hard to look striking. To that end, everyone at the event where I was making my debut had put a great deal of effort into their appearance. Everywhere I looked, I saw dazzling displays of beauty. Standing in a corner of the opulent ballroom, I was unable to contain my excitement as I took in the stunning scene.

"Oh, there's Lady Aurelia! It's been rather a while since I last saw her. She's even more beautiful now. She already has the bearing of a princess. Her dress is magnificent, too. Any color would suit her, no matter how ostentatious, but she's purposely chosen that deep shade of blue. Such elegant taste! It sets off her looks and her luscious golden hair so marvelously. How can I describe the faces of the men surrounding her other than 'spellbound'? Frankly, I can understand their reactions!"

"Stop."

“And there’s Lady Marguerite of House Delvincourt! I see the voluptuous figure she inherited from her mother is just as sensuously impactful as ever. Am I imagining it, or has she grown even more buxom since I last saw her? I wonder if there’s some secret to her success. Perhaps it is simply hereditary. Our mother is rather flat-chested as well...and the only voluptuous part of our father is his belly.”

“Marielle, are you listening?”

“Goodness, that couple over there—what *could* they be doing? There’s definitely something suspicious going on. Oh my, they’re surreptitiously leaving the ballroom! Some sort of secret rendezvous? Perhaps I could follow them!”

When I casually took a step forward, my older brother, Gerard, pulled me back by the ribbon around my waist. “Stop it. That’s thoroughly improper.”

I turned to face him, and he stared back at me from behind his black-rimmed glasses; Gerard was bespectacled like me, though his glasses were half-hidden by the dense thicket of his bangs.

He sighed in exasperation. “Why are you acting this way?”

“How can I resist? It’s a real, adult romance! It’s nothing like the faint bittersweetness of being given a lizard by the boy next door. It’s a grown-up love affair bathed in rich sweetness! This is the very thing I’ve longed to see. To thrill the readers, I’ll have to know all about real love.”

“I fail to see what was so bittersweet about that business with the lizard. He threw it at you to torment you. A child who would celebrate that is certainly too young to be stealing glimpses at other people’s trysts. Besides, have you forgotten why you’re here?”

“I most certainly have not! Look, I have my trusty notebook and pen right here.”

“Ah, so you haven’t forgotten, you’ve just completely misunderstood! Stop focusing on other people’s love lives and start looking for a husband of your own. After all that effort to dress up, do you mean to go home without dancing with anyone? Wouldn’t you find that a bit sad?”

“You danced with me,” I replied, putting my notebook away. “I’m happy with

that.”

As was usual for a debutante, I’d been escorted here by my brother. Per convention, he had led me in my first dance. It had also been my last, for no other suitors had come to ask me to dance. I’d expected to be thoroughly ignored, and those expectations had been met.

“Ignored” was generous, even. It was more that I hadn’t registered to them in the first place. The taffeta dress Mother and Father had given me was lovely, and it did make me look presentable in my own way. However, the moment I arrived here, I had realized the truth. Amongst all these young ladies bursting with beauty and charisma, even my best effort was equivalent to a tadpole sprouting legs. There were limits to how much a dress could achieve when worn by a plain girl with no presence whatsoever.

The faint hopes I’d been harboring had vanished within five minutes and I’d decided that I would have to dedicate my life to fangirl pursuits after all. That I would carefully and thoroughly observe this resplendent world and recreate it in vivid detail in my writing. Gatherings of lords and ladies were an exhibition of human behavioral patterns. All around, there were some people making reputations as shameless philanderers and others burning with secret passion. Over here, a new spark of love was being ignited. Over there, a relationship was falling apart. Human drama as surprising as any novel was unfolding everywhere I looked, and I couldn’t tear myself away from it.

“What are we going to do with you? Well, never mind. If that’s what gives you pleasure, then feel free.”

With those incredulous words, Gerard quickly threw in the towel.

“The average gentleman won’t approve of your personality and interests, anyway,” he added. “It’s probably better for you to keep doing as you wish rather than forcing yourself to enter that gaudy fray only to be hurt in the end.”

I glanced up at my brother. The truth, as I was well aware, was that he had his own reasons for being glued to a largely abandoned corner of the room. It wasn’t purely because he was escorting his inexperienced sister.

“What about your search for a wife? Mother’s been quite insistent.”

My brother was twenty-three years old. Rather than being so concerned about me, who had only just debuted, he should have been striving to make connections with young noblewomen. He would never be married if he simply stood and waited, as evidenced by the total lack of attention we were drawing here in our isolated corner. Like sister, like brother. He, too, was a plain man who attracted no interest from potential admirers.

He had bushy, unruly hair of the same brown color as mine. He should have styled it neatly with pomade or some such, but he paid it so little care that it lacked any sophistication at all. The black-rimmed glasses were also as far from smart and stylish as could be imagined. From his features alone, he could have been relatively handsome, but he went out of his way to hide them, so the ladies of society graced him with neither their gazes nor their interest.

The man himself seemed not to mind. If not for his duty of escorting me, he wouldn't have attended this evening at all.

"Those women in heavy makeup smelling of perfume hold no appeal to me whatsoever. Compared to the natural scent of flowers and nature, they're an embarrassment."

"There are ladies who are more moderate and low-key."

"Nor can I stand any who are haughty and proud. Don't they feel ashamed looking at a flower that's perfect from the moment it blooms without needing anything else?"

"There are kind ones too, I'm quite sure."

"And any woman who lives for extravagant luxury is out of the question. Our family doesn't have money to squander."

I arched my eyebrows. "And yet you keep ordering your rare seedlings."

"What's wasteful about that? They have a practical value."

"I honestly don't feel you're in a position to criticize me, Gerard. You should at least acknowledge that you, too, are rather odd for putting horticulture in pride of place above all else."

"The 'too' there is telling. That means you're aware of your own peculiarity."

Anyway, there's nothing wrong with horticulture. It's a perfectly appropriate hobby for a nobleman."

"Though a plant can't measure up to the cuteness of a cat!"

"Why are we talking about cats all of a sudden?!"

Forgetting where we were, we lapsed into our usual sibling bickering. Then, nearby, someone softly burst into laughter.

As one, we stopped talking and turned to look. A tall figure stood in a spot that left him partly hidden by a flower vase and a curtain. The young blond man was covering his mouth with his hand.

"My apologies. Your good cheer was infectious."

It looked as though he was taking a moment away from the gazes of the crowd. He put his glass down, bowed to us both, then walked off. When he appeared before the room again, all eyes were on him in an instant—including mine. His tall, broad-shouldered form gripped my attention.

"Gerard," I said, my voice a whisper.

My brother heaved a sigh beside me.

"Who was that man?" I asked.

"Easy, Marielle. I understand the sentiment, but please calm down. He's not an option for you. No matter how hard you try, he'll forever be out of reach. Do you understand?"

I pulled on Gerard's arm. "I'm asking you who he is!"

Despite ardently following the man with my eyes, I soon lost sight of him, much to my chagrin, as a growing crowd of people surrounded him. Every young lady, from exquisite beauties to alluring vixens, was drawn to this one gentleman.

"Tell me!"

When I shook his arm and pleaded, Gerard answered with a deep sigh. "Lord Simeon of House Flaubert."

"Flaubert... The earldom, yes?"

“Indeed. He’s the son and heir to that tremendously esteemed house. Furthermore, he’s the close confidant of His Highness the Crown Prince, and was promoted to Vice Captain of the Royal Order of Knights just the other day. He’s a year older than me, I believe, so he should be turning twenty-four this year. He even has the rank of major already. At this rate, he’ll be a field marshal by the time he’s thirty! No, that would surely be too much even for him.”

“Lord Simeon...”

Halfway through Gerard’s explanation, the words stopped registering as I locked his name inside my heart like a treasure. It was the briefest of encounters; I hadn’t even had time to say anything. By the next time we met, I was sure he’d have forgotten me already. All he’d seen was a squabbling pair of unknown siblings. We’d vanish from his memory after five minutes.

For me, this chance meeting was a revelation.

“Marielle, are you listening? The peerless House Flaubert wouldn’t even consider a match with an insignificant house like ours. Not to mention that the man himself is God’s gift to women and the most eligible bachelor of our generation. Could you say with any confidence that you could beat the competition? You’re out of your depth. It’s a dream that is not to be.”

“I don’t care about that!”

“Excuse me?”

Mesmerized, I let go of my brother’s arm and interlocked my fingers in front of my chest. “Lord Simeon. What a wonderful person. He’s as dashing as a storybook Prince Charming, and his tall, slender body is akin to an elegant white lily. And yet, he lacks any sense of ephemeral weakness. His refined appearance exudes mighty strength.”

“Because he’s a military officer, I suppose. Combat training would have played a major role in his life.”

“And he’s the Vice Captain of the Royal Order of Knights, the military’s royal guard branch composed of the elite few worthy of the title of ‘knight.’ Not Captain, but Vice Captain! How perfect!”

“Hmm? Why? Wouldn’t the highest position be better?”

“There’s beauty in matching the archetype exactly. Most outstanding of all are his glasses! They give the cold, hard aura of an intellectual! Nothing can match that!”

“But you wear glasses. So do I.”

“I can scarcely believe that a man of his nature truly exists in this world. I’m grateful to be alive. Grateful that I came to this place on this day. Thank you, God, for letting me meet the blackhearted man of my dreams!”

“Blackhearted? Where on earth did that come from?!”

The one I’d just caught a glimpse of was the very picture of my most beloved archetype. He was a dashing young man whose graceful appearance was accompanied by a powerful, threatening air of roguish villainy. Oh, the quiet pressure exuded by the smile he’d shown us! Hidden behind his mild-mannered exterior was a scheming tactician. To think that my favorite type of character, the one that captured my heart in stories more than any other, really existed! The brutal, blackhearted military officer!

“Wait,” said Gerard in response to my mutterings. “Don’t just assume all that. Admittedly he is as much brain as brawn, but I’m sure there’s nothing brutal and villainous about him. From everything I’ve heard, he’s fairly straitlaced.”

A new sense of anticipation swelled in me. *If I keep going to social gatherings, will I be able to keep seeing him? While I observe all different kinds of human behavior to gather research material, I can gaze at the very object of all my fangirl desires. Oh, how magical society is! I’ve entered a world that glows and glistens. All I have to do is collect the sparkling morsels and I’ll be able to write books that truly make the heart race!*

“You’re still not listening, are you? Never mind. Just don’t tell anyone else about this, all right? Do whatever research gathering you wish to, just don’t forget to behave sensibly in front of other people.”

“Of course. I won’t behave in a way that makes me conspicuous. I’ll silently blend into the background, devoting myself to moving like a shadow so that no one even realizes I’m there.”

“You *really* don’t intend to look for a husband, do you?”

That was how I remembered my debut. My first steps into the adult world were more astonishing than I'd ever have expected. That night had thrilled me and set my fangirl fire blazing out of control. Even though no one asked me to dance and, in fact, no one even came and spoke to me, I had the best time imaginable. I had countless other reasons to be excited. More than I could have absorbed in a single lifetime.

From that day forth, I studied the people around me wherever I went, but my greatest sources of pleasure were my occasional glimpses of that particular man. I didn't exchange any words with him, of course. He didn't even notice my existence. I gazed at him secretly from afar, never even telling him that he was exactly what I fangirled over most of all.

"And that was that," I concluded.

After I shared this precious memory, my husband pressed his fingers to his forehead and exhaled. "I don't remember that at all, but somehow I can picture your reaction exactly."

I chuckled. Three years after that sensational encounter, the man who lived so far above the clouds that I thought I'd never, ever reach him had surprised me with a marriage proposal. A year after that, at age nineteen, I now stood close by his side as his wife.

No one had imagined this development. I doubted even God understood it. Sometimes truth is stranger than even the strangest fiction. As an author, I found it quite vexing; it stirred up my creative urges to even greater heights.

Tonight was another occasion with great numbers of lords and ladies dancing beneath the chandeliers. We'd reached the end of the season when invitations flew left and right and everyone's social calendars were full. The day had finally come for House Flaubert to throw a ball.

Being a ball thrown by a wealthy and prestigious house, the event's scale was immense. The guest list had easily reached three digits, with prominent figures arriving one by one. I was no longer allowed to hide in the corner. As the wife of the future earl, I had to greet the guests and keep an eye on the proceedings, giving orders to the servants as needed.

Frankly, I was on the verge of death. Even a modest party for close relatives at my parents' house had pushed me to my limits. Having a ballroom filled with ten or twenty times as many people, and having to play hostess rather than watching from the sidelines, was grueling.

Upon reaching a point where I genuinely was close to collapse, I had asked if I could take a quick break. Then, staggering, I'd escaped to the balcony. My husband had followed and joined me there.

The cool night breeze felt pleasant on my skin. Summer had reached an end. In less than a month, long sleeves would be required even during the daytime. Autumn came early to countries in the northern part of the continent. In countries even further north than Lagrange, such as Slavia and Teme, I'd heard they had frosty weather as early as October.

I went over to the steps that led from the balcony to the garden. When I started walking down them, careful to avoid stepping on my dress's long hem, Lord Simeon offered assistance without a moment's delay. Supported by his large hand, I slowly descended to the perfectly tended gardens.

The gardens that stretched out at the back of the Flaubert manor were vast enough to be called a park. Flower beds and paths had been placed with expert mathematical precision. Seen from above, the view was like a painting on a canvas. Lagrangian-style gardens were designed more for the joy of looking at them than of walking around them, so they were typically closed as soon as the sun set, preventing a nighttime stroll.

Tonight, however, there were lamps lit all around and no need to carefully watch one's step. The mystical scenery had an entirely different ambiance than in broad daylight. My husband and I sneaking out into that world together sent a thrill running through me. It reminded me of that pair of lovers I'd seen all those years ago.

"I can hardly believe we met on the very day of my debut," I told him. "The ball when you noticed me was in summer, wasn't it? It can't have been too long afterwards."

Walking beside me, Lord Simeon began reminiscing as well. "My intention was to observe you secretly from afar, just as yours was in return. Looking back,

it is quite comical that we were both watching each other while thinking the other didn't know of our existence."

"If we'd noticed one day and our eyes had met, it would have been a twist worthy of a novel."

"Even if that had happened, I have a feeling our lives wouldn't have gone as smoothly as in a story."

Lord Simeon spoke with a touch of laughter in his voice. I started laughing too. We had watched each other with curiosity as the driving force, unaware of any romantic feelings. I was caught in a fangirl frenzy, while he saw me as something like a rare insect. It was unbelievable that such a pair had ever made it to the altar.

Now, his arms, his large and unyielding frame, his warm body heat, and his kind voice were all too dear to me for words. Though he'd looked to me like a blackhearted villain, he was actually serious to a fault. He presented a flawless face to the world, but this occasionally slipped, and he was often far too stubborn and inflexible. I adored all that about him and more.

Hiding on my own was no longer enough for me. Even if everyone else walked right past me without noticing, I wanted Lord Simeon alone to stop in his tracks. I wanted him to gaze at me with his clear blue eyes and call my name. By now, I couldn't imagine living any kind of life without him beside me.

The music played by the band rode on the night breeze and reached my ears. The insects in the shadows of the surrounding foliage were not to be outdone. They, too, were playing a symphony.

We stopped at a crossroads, where the path expanded into an area with a decorative fountain.

"At the time, dealing with women was quite a chore for me. Actively approaching any particular young lady would have provoked negative reactions from the others and only caused her suffering. That was why I tended to keep my distance from all of them. Even so, rather than leaving, I should have invited you to dance. Your night ended without a single person asking you, didn't it?"

Lord Simeon was very belatedly expressing regret for an incident from four

years ago that he didn't even remember.

"Quite a lonely way to spend your long-awaited debut," he added.

"I wouldn't worry. If you *had* asked me to dance, it would have been just as you say. I'd have become a major target of jealousy and faced a lot of bullying. Actually, perhaps it is a shame that you didn't ask me."

"That's not what I meant."

"Still, I got to experience plenty of that after we got engaged, so no harm done. I collected more reference material than I'd ever know what to do with, so I have no complaints whatsoever!"

"I'm so glad," he replied with an exhausted smile.

Then, mysteriously, he turned to face me head-on. I thought he might kiss me, but instead he put a hand on his chest and delivered a dapper bow. He offered the other hand to me. With a playful glint in his eye, he said, "Well then, allow me to rectify my error. Would you care to dance, lovely lady?"

With the shimmering fountain behind him in the lamplit garden, the sight of him was impossibly dashing. I could hardly believe it was real. I felt as though I'd been led astray by a fairy and pulled into his world.

The wicked fairy seducing me was diabolically charming and perfect. After an invitation like that, how could I not take his hand?

"Gladly, fine gentleman."

His waiting hand made my heart pound. My fingertips, covered in lace gloves, gently found his. He pulled me toward him and wrapped an arm around my back. Feeling secure in his arms, I joined him in a private dance.

We moved slowly, perfectly synchronized, giving our bodies over to the waltz being played in the distance and the insects' concerto surrounding us. Secretly, watched only by the moon and stars, the two of us danced as if in a dream.



My eyes were focused on his, and he saw nothing but me. We didn't look away from each other even for an instant as the scent and warmth of the night enveloped us. He led me with elegance, and the hem of my dress fluttered and made even the flowers around my feet dance. Where did reality end and the dream begin? I couldn't tell. Intoxicated by the sheer joy, I just gazed at Lord Simeon.

I hardly even noticed when our feet stopped moving. He leaned in so close I could feel his breath. Then our glasses collided with a soft *clink*.

We drew apart for a moment and smiled at one another. *This has returned us to reality somewhat*, I thought. *After all, neither fairies nor protagonists wear glasses*. However, I loved watching the moment he took off his glasses. I loved seeing his beautiful face with nothing in the way. Nor did I show any resistance when his hands removed the glasses from my face. I merely waited patiently for the exhilaration I knew he was about to offer me again.

On this wondrous late-summer night, people were laughing, making noise, joining hands, and raising toasts. Despite the late hour, the party was in full swing. There in our quiet spot that looked up at the ballroom, he and I drew closer to one another.

Chapter Two

Writing a story is a lot like going on a journey.

Before you set out, you may think you know what kinds of landscapes will unfurl in that world, what kinds of people will live in it. When you actually start walking, however, you encounter one surprise after another. You forge close connections with the people who inhabit the world of the story, and travel down a long, long road with them, until finally you arrive at the last line. Then, when you put that last word on the page, the journey ends.

How can I express the way it feels? There's the joy and satisfaction of having finally reached the destination, and the exhaustion. There's also the sadness, the emptiness, that comes from realizing the journey is over.

That moment always stirs up a storm of mixed emotions that leaves me trembling.

"Finished."

I lifted my pen from the paper and exhaled softly. Roughly half of my soul was still left behind in the story, and I put the pen down gently in order to avoid disturbing the lingering echo. I gazed at the completed manuscript for a while, then, after making sure the ink was dry on the last page, I picked it up. I gathered all the pages together and dropped them back onto the desk with a light *thud*. Looking at the neatly aligned stack of paper, I couldn't keep a grin from spreading across my face.

"I'm finished! I'm finished! I'm finished!"

I practically jumped out of my seat, then spun around on the spot with the manuscript in my hands. My cat, who was sleeping on the window ledge, raised her head and looked toward me. Was it just my imagination, or was there a hint of cold exasperation in her striking blue eyes?

I chuckled. "I've finished my book, Chouchou! You might not appreciate it, but I bought that comfy cushion you're sitting on with my fees from the publisher.

The reason you can live in such luxury is because of your mama's writing."

She didn't understand my words, of course. All she knew was that I'd pulled myself away from the desk and was now paying attention to her. In response, she stood up and stretched, then jumped down from the bay window and came over to me.

"Goodness, the sun's already set."

Several lamps were lit in the room, including the desk lamp. Some kind soul had apparently come and lit them while I was thoroughly absorbed in my writing. It was as bright in the room as it was pitch dark outside.

I looked at the clock. Had I actually gone outside, there would probably still have been vestiges of sunlight. Until recently, there'd have been a clear blue sky at this hour, but now the days were so short. Beneath the window, the insects were already in full swing.

I put down the manuscript and petted Chouchou, who was nuzzling up against the hem of my skirt. "It's time for your din-din, isn't it? I bet you're hungry. Yes you are, aren't you?"

It's dinner time for humans, too. I'd better be on my way soon.

Just as I had that thought, my lady's maid entered my study.

"Joanna, you're just in time. Could I ask you to go and get Chouchou's dinner?"

The personal lady's maid provided by my in-laws was a young beauty with chocolate-colored hair. She was slightly older than me and had the air of an older sister.

Joanna nodded. "Yes, I'm sure it's already been prepared. Can you finish up here, my lady? Lord Simeon has returned home."

"Really?!"

I was about to reply that I'd just finished, but her last words made me jerk to attention. *My beloved husband is home! I can't dilly-dally here, I have to go and welcome him!*

I picked up my cat and fled the study. In a great hurry, I ran along the corridor

and down the stairs. When I landed on the first floor at such an energetic pace that I almost tumbled over, the white royal guard's uniform caught my eye. Lord Simeon had just entered and was handing his bag to a servant.

Even though we'd been married for a few months now and I saw him every morning and evening, seeing him again always sent a thrill running through me just like the first time we met. *What a dashingly attractive husband I have. How does he appear so blackhearted? Even when he's not actually plotting any kind of scheme, he embodies that look without any effort. Just looking at him makes me fall in love all over again.*

Breathlessly, I ran over to him. "Welcome home, Lord Simeon!"

Up close, he was so beautiful it was almost scary, but the way he embraced me was gentle. In an instant, the eyes reminiscent of shards of ice had transformed into a peaceful spring sky.

"I only just got home," he replied with an enchanting smile as sweet as honey or sugar.

Suddenly, the rush that had been pleasantly warming my heart began to boil over. *Oh no, steam is coming out of the kettle spout! My cheeks are so fiery hot that I'm going to burn! Wh-Wh-Wh-What's going on? He's exuding even more amorous appeal than usual. Normally he's serious and pure-hearted in contrast to his playboy-like appearance, so where has all this sensual heat come from?!*

I was lost for words. He bent down and delivered a light kiss. This was the same greeting he gave me every day, but for some reason I found it intensely embarrassing today. Without thinking, I thrust out the cat in my arms.

"Here, Chouchou! Daddy's home, so say hello to him as well!"

Even with a white fluffball right in front of his face, Lord Simeon's mood didn't sour. He let out a chuckle and drew his face toward the cat's as if to deliver a kiss in the same way. However, she silently raised a paw to block him.

He froze. The springy paw pad pushed back against my husband's face, quietly yet emphatically rejecting his affection. He momentarily pulled away, but when he leaned in again, she spurned him with the other paw.

The cat twisted around and looked at the floor, signaling for me to put her

down. I obeyed and let her go. After grooming herself for a few moments, she then walked off in a leisurely manner. *She's probably on her way to the kitchen. That clever girl knows where they make her dinner.*

My husband turned to watch her go with a distinct undercurrent of melancholy.

"She's hungry, so she wanted to rush off and eat," I offered hurriedly. "And cats don't like it when you bring your face close to them. You can't greet them the same way you do a human."

Oh dear, my husband's feelings were hurt and it's all my fault!

When I handled her, she didn't get annoyed no matter what part of her I touched. She even brought her nose up to me of her own accord. With Lord Simeon, though, she would allow him to stroke her belly, but bringing his face so close was inadvisable. There was nothing to be done about that. I'd raised her since she was so tiny she could sit in the palm of my hand. If she met someone new now that she was fully grown, of course she'd react to him differently. It didn't mean she hated him!

Lord Simeon turned to look back at me as I frantically tried to reassure him about all that. "Yes, I suppose that's how cats are," he said with a half smile.

He wrapped an arm around my back and pulled me closer. The warmth of his kisses rained down on my forehead and cheeks. Perhaps he was just making up for being so cruelly rejected by Chouchou, but his passion rapidly flared to such a fervor that it seemed ready to develop into far more than innocent caresses.

"You haven't been drinking, have you?" I asked hesitantly.

"I don't drink. You know that."

He was quite right. *Which means he's displaying all this affection while sober. I'm happy, but surprised.*

The nearby servants didn't know where to look. The butler remained impressively dignified and composed, but the young maids averted their eyes in embarrassment. Lord Simeon wasn't typically the sort of man to be so uninhibited where others could see, but it appeared he was growing more relaxed about it in his own home. *I suppose servants are kind of like family,*

anyway.

“You’re in a cheerful mood today. Did something good happen?”

“Nothing in particular—not out there, anyway. It’s just that seeing you welcome me like this when I arrive home makes me happy.” As he spoke, a fond smile spread over his face. “Your expression suggests that my return makes you unbearably glad, and you convey that joy with your whole body and come running straight to me. Seeing it has a marked effect on me. I can’t help responding in kind.”

“Oh, Lord Simeon...”

Such welcome words, and I knew they weren’t empty words of seduction. They were plain and unadorned—an expression of his true emotions.

The butler and maids set about finishing their tasks with awkward looks on their faces. I nestled against Lord Simeon and we went up to the second floor.

First, he went into the bedroom to get changed. Even though we were married, that was still cause to excuse himself. I restrained my urge to help and waited in the living room for him to finish.

Being an efficient man, he was back before I knew it. Over the top of his comfortable indoor clothing, he had donned a soft woolen cardigan. It was a russet shade knitted with a crimson pattern and perfectly suited to a relaxed autumn evening. It had actually been a gift from my grandmother. Unlike me, she was skilled at handicrafts, so she’d decided to knit this for him before the weather grew too cold.

Although Lord Simeon tended not to wear reddish hues, it was a gift, so he graciously wore it. It also suited him to a T. *Still, the color is a touch understated and more suited to an older wearer. Maybe next time I’ll ask her to try a brighter color. I suspect Lord Simeon could even pull off pink if it came to it. Everyone would be thunderstruck!*

“Is everything all right?” Lord Simeon asked, sitting next to me on the couch. I’d been staring into space, entranced by my imaginings.

“I was just thinking about how well you pull off anything you wear. Reddish hues suit you perfectly, don’t you agree? Why don’t we try some brighter

shades in future?”

“I’d rather not be too garish.”

“If you’ll allow me to put it bluntly, the clothes you choose are too plain. You could wear far less understated attire and no one would think it out of the ordinary.”

“You’re a fine one to talk.”

For a moment we glowered at each other, then we quickly smiled again.

Enjoying this kind of banter every day makes me so happy I could burst. As the years pass, will this thrill start to fade? Right now, that doesn’t feel possible.

“Dressing you up has far more value than trying to improve *my* appearance.” I leaned against Lord Simeon and enjoyed the fuzzy sensation of the wool on my cheek. His sturdy body took my weight without wavering even slightly.

“That’s not necessary for a man. As long as I’m dressed appropriately for the situation, nothing else matters.”

“What a waste of how superlatively attractive you are! I think even a feather hat or a sequined jacket would suit you.”

“Whether they’d suit me or not, why would I wear those? They sound like stage costumes. What are you trying to do with me?”

“Ooh, I know, then! A black military uniform with a riding crop as an accessory!”

“Sadly, the Lagrangian military only has white, green, and blue uniforms.”

“I see you didn’t refuse the riding crop.”

A pause. “No! I’m not holding it for you!”

Laughing, I tried to let go of him, but he grabbed me and lifted me up onto his lap. “How have you been today? Did you finish writing your new book?”

“Yes, just before you got home. It went quickly thanks to the wonderful study you furnished me with.”

“I’m glad. Agnès Vivier’s readers must be desperate for a new work, after all.”

“I worked flat out before our wedding to make sure I had plenty of time off, but I did have to write a new one eventually. I’m thinking of delivering it to the publisher tomorrow.”

Before going out, I had to get permission from my husband. When I added that I was looking forward to taking a walk through the city again after so long, Lord Simeon appeared to muse on this for a moment.

“Does it have to be tomorrow? I’ll be off duty three days from now, so I’ll have time then.”

I quickly shook my head. “Oh, no, I didn’t mean to suggest that. I don’t want to drag you around all over the place. I’ll go by myself.”

“I can’t allow you to walk around on your own,” he said, chiding me somewhat with his gaze.

I drew back slightly. “I meant that I’d take Joanna with me, of course. I realize I can’t act the way I used to.”

Before I was married, I used to casually go out whenever the whim took me and walk all over the city dressed as someone who belonged there. Even though this wasn’t appropriate behavior for a young lady from a good family, my parents allowed it. They never scolded me for going off on my own without even taking a maid.

It was very permissive of them, although their mindset was that I was so plain that I didn’t attract any attention, and thus there was no need to worry. The result was that I’d enjoyed a comfortable degree of freedom while I was single and had the chance to learn all about the workings of the city.

Nowadays, I had to follow the conventions of the family I’d married into. This was especially important because House Flaubert was a uniquely prestigious noble house, so my behavior was always noticed. Wherever I went, I had to be accompanied by my lady’s maid at the very least.

“I’ll take one of the house’s carriages, and I won’t go anywhere off the beaten path. I’ll just go for a stroll in Chardin Square and along the bank of the Latour, and then if I have time I’ll stop by Tarentule to say hello to the Three Flowers. Please, don’t worry. I don’t want to take up your precious free time.”

“You’re planning to go out and have fun on your own while leaving your husband behind? What a cruel wife.”

Wrapping my hair around a finger and playing with it ticklishly, Lord Simeon brought his face closer. Despite calling me cruel, his voice was a sweet whisper that had a powerful impact on me.

“W-w-w-well, I’m talking about tomorrow! On your day off, I was thinking we could spend some quiet time together at home!”

“I want to enjoy a day out with you. It’s not quite the best time to see the ginkgo trees yet, but we could still bask in the atmosphere, couldn’t we? I remember when we went walking together last year. At that point, we still hadn’t managed to express our feelings, so we couldn’t be our true selves.”

“Yes, you’re right.”

Last autumn. I remembered it well. Back then, I had still thought his proposal was for a marriage of convenience, and was laboring under the misapprehension that Lord Simeon loved another. Yes, I had been wrong in all sorts of ways. The feelings he had for the person in question didn’t extend beyond friendship and fealty. It wasn’t the kind of forbidden love that makes a certain subset of readers writhe in pleasure.

“Are you *sure* you want to come with? I’ll spend a lot of time shopping. Gentlemen are always saying that nothing is more exhausting than accompanying a woman on a shopping trip.”

A day out with Lord Simeon would make me happy as well, but I didn’t want to hold back on doing everything I had planned. I was worried that if I dragged him here, there, and everywhere, it might leave him exhausted, so I absolutely couldn’t ask him to join me.

I realized I was looking up at him with puppy dog eyes, and I feared he might take that as me pleading for the opposite...but my husband’s expression didn’t change a bit. He still smiled gently, but otherwise didn’t appear to respond.

I suppose the puppy dog eyes have no effect on someone who often acts as if he’s made of stone. Or maybe it’s just that I don’t have the beautiful looks required to make it work. Yes, yes, I knew that already. Hmph!

“I’ll gladly buy you whatever you want. Accessories, jewels, anything at all. Handbags made with Shulkian weaving are popular lately, I hear? Oh, and we’ll have to order some winter clothes. Shall we stop by Madame Pelagie’s boutique? Or would you rather browse for off-the-shelf items at Quatre Saisons? The standard may be lower, but it’s fun to choose from such a wide selection, is it not?”

The eyes made an impact after all! But I forcefully shook my head at my husband, who had taken my imploring gaze as an invitation to spoil me with every fiber of his being. *No, no, no! That wasn’t what I intended at all!*

“Well, you see, I was actually thinking of visiting the flea market. I don’t have anything in particular to buy, I’ll just wander aimlessly and see if anything takes my fancy. Surely you’d find that exhausting?”

Lord Simeon let out an amused chuckle. “Do you have the stamina to shop for long enough that I’d get exhausted? I can only imagine you’d be the one to collapse first.”

Hmm. He has a point.

The arms embracing me were strong and the chest I was leaning against was sturdy. He was a trained military officer, so my worries had been entirely unnecessary. After all, the royal guards were specialists when it came to bodyguard duty. Accompanying someone on a walk around the city would be nothing.

“Will it bother you if I’m there? Would you be unable to unwind with your husband present? We haven’t even been married for half a year. Such coldness from my wife is so tragic I might cry.”

“Honestly, you know full well that I don’t feel that way! Though I would quite like to see tears in the demon’s eyes. Very well, let’s go together in three days. I expect you to keep your promise, though. No complaining, regardless of how aimlessly I wander. Don’t start insisting it’s pointless to look at so many things without buying any.”

“Even though you can have as many things as you want.”

His smiling lips descended on the nape of my neck. I twisted, tickled by his

breath, and then his large body leaned on me more heavily with a distinct sense that he meant to have his way with me. *Wait, isn't it too soon for that? We haven't even had dinner yet.*

"Shouldn't we get going?" I said awkwardly. "It's dinner time."

I pushed back Lord Simeon's head and escaped from my sweet prison. This left me about to fall out of his lap, so I put my hand on the table for support. As I did so, an envelope placed there caught my eye. *Oh yes, I remember now.*

Lord Simeon kept me balanced while I picked up the envelope. "I forgot all about this. It arrived today from Enciel Island."

I passed him the letter, which had been delivered by ship. He looked at the sealing wax and sender's name, then immediately opened it. After positioning myself comfortably beside him again, I waited silently until he finished reading the letter and returned it to the envelope.

"What did your grandfather write?"

The letter had been sent by Lord Donatien, the former Earl Flaubert. He lived on a distant island, where we'd gone to meet him on our honeymoon. Since then, he'd periodically kept us informed of the latest developments, and we'd done the same. No doubt there was something important written in this latest letter, too.

"Adrien has arrived safely and taken up his new post as second-in-command to the base commander," Lord Simeon replied calmly. "He's settling in well, apparently. I'll note that even though he's no great thinker, that doesn't mean he isn't capable. He's also able to throw off his reserve and get close to people with no regard to status. In that regard, he far surpasses me. The commander, a man named Passemard, is experienced and likely to get on well with Adrien. I'm sure he'll provide fine leadership for my brother."

The middle of the three Flaubert brothers, Adrien, was in the navy. A few days ago he'd received orders that he was being reassigned to Enciel Island, so he'd set off, grumbling incessantly. He had lamented that after just returning from another country, he once again had to travel far away for an overseas assignment and would no longer be with his beloved older brother.

“I don’t know much about this sort of thing, but is it really not a problem to assign him to a base in his own family’s territory? I’d have thought they’d want to avoid that to prevent a conflict of interest.”

“You’re right, of course. Ordinarily—in peacetime—a transfer like this wouldn’t happen. However, right now we need to be on guard against Orta. It would be more straightforward if the structure from long ago still applied, when the feudal lord had the command role and the population were the soldiers. However, nowadays the military forces aren’t under the lord’s jurisdiction, and the residents are mostly noncombatants. This means that there are two groups with authority on the same island, which can lead to confusion in times of emergency. Adrien serves as someone with a connection to both sides, which should improve cooperation.”

He then joked that once peace had returned, Adrien would probably be shunted off somewhere else without delay. All this made sense, but it only intensified my concerns.

“The situation must be quite serious if that’s necessary. I hope it will be all right.”

The recent news that our neighbor to the east, the Republic of Orta, had declared war on its eastern neighbor, the Kingdom of Smerda, had caused turmoil among all the nearby countries. Lord Adrien’s reassignment was a consequence of that.

Although this was a dispute between other countries and didn’t directly involve Lagrange, we couldn’t sit back and relax when war was being waged almost on our doorstep. Orta was a danger to lands other than Smerda—and all the surrounding countries knew it. The military had seized power there twenty years ago in a coup d’état, and ever since then, they’d been going down a strange path.

Enciel Island had been Ortan territory a long time ago and was still very close to their borders. If the worst happened, it would likely become a frontline base. And, based on what Lord Simeon was saying, this was a real possibility. I couldn’t help feeling anxious about the people on the island, including Lord Donatien and Lord Adrien.

“Vigilance is needed, but Orta won’t engage in all-out war with Lagrange. They probably couldn’t even if they wanted to. Lagrangian forces would be bolstered by reinforcements from Easdale, so Orta’s defeat would be all but guaranteed. The war would be over before it even began.”

Trying hard to reassure me, Lord Simeon stated all this in a gentle tone. Of course, it was probably more than just an optimistic prediction. It was undoubtedly based on information he’d heard directly from the military...or, more likely, from His Highness the Crown Prince himself.

Lord Simeon stood up and presented his hand to me. I took it and stood as well, and together we began to walk to the dining room.

“Is the reason we’re allied with Smerda in order to stop Orta from getting out of control?”

“Partly, but the biggest reason is Slavia. Orta and Smerda are a buffer zone, so to speak, between us and the northern empire. If they were to be captured by Slavia, we’d be directly under threat. We must do what we can to prevent that.”

I paused. “So we’re using another country as a shield for our own benefit?”

When I made this pointed comment, he laughed awkwardly.

“That’s one way of looking at it. But, by forming an alliance with us, Smerda gains our protection and won’t be invaded by the empire. It’s a give-and-take relationship. Orta’s military leadership is fully aligned with Slavia at the moment, so we can’t bring Orta into our camp, but we’re hoping to do that eventually as well.”

That was why it would be all right, Lord Simeon assured me. Although I was left with doubts about how we would ever possibly form an alliance with a country we were on such bad terms with, I didn’t ask any further questions. Even though we were family, he couldn’t leak classified information. Besides, even if he had told me more, I didn’t know how much of it I would have understood. I decided that if he said it was fine, I should believe him.

“Shall we write a letter to Lord Adrien, too? I’m sure he’d be absolutely thrilled to receive one from you.”

“I’d rather not. The separation will be good for him. He’s twenty-four years

old. If nothing changes, he'll still be following me around, crying, 'Simeon! Simeon!' when he's thirty or forty. He's not a dog or a cat. We have to stop indulging him."

"He's adorable, but I can understand how you feel. Even though he's a big boy, he behaves like a needy child, and he's so silly. He's just like Max, my family's next-door neighbors' dog."

"Now that you mention it, I can see the similarities. No, wait! I don't feel this is helping with not indulging him!"

"Despite all your grumbling, you're a very caring and affectionate brother, aren't you?"

He had no response to that. I couldn't help giggling. *What's wrong with brothers having a close relationship? It's only you who indulges him, Lord Simeon. I'm sure the navy doesn't, so everything's fine.*

An angelic boy's head poked out from the dining room and called to us.

"Simeon, Miss Marielle, stop being all lovey-dovey and hurry up. Otherwise we'll start without you."

Feigning innocence, the youngest Flaubert brother poked fun at us, then disappeared back into the room.

I asked my husband, "What about Lord Noel?"

Lord Simeon shrugged his shoulders. "He makes us indulge him as a calculated ploy. Even without all that, he's smart enough to manage on his own. I have no worries about him whatsoever."

After those brusque words, he put an arm around me and we quickened our pace. However, when I saw him serving dessert to Lord Noel after the main course, it took everything I had to keep from bursting out laughing.

Chapter Three

My publisher, Satie Publishing, was a new company that had been established less than five years prior. It had found success in carving out a new niche in the market for female-oriented light reads centering on romance, but its financial situation was still something of a struggle. Finding its office meant going past the impressive buildings lining the wide streets of the business district and entering a backstreet in the less affluent part of the city. There the company had set up shop in a building shared with other companies.

I smiled as I said hello to the staff, who I hadn't seen in some time. However, they all froze the moment they saw Lord Simeon following behind me.

"How nice to see you all after so long. You always take such good care of my wife."

For the six employees of this tiny publishing house, the heir to a prestigious earldom was an even scarier visitor than a debt collector. All he'd done was offer a cordial greeting, but they openly trembled and drew back in fear. *Well, I suppose his smile only enhances that villainous aura.*

Paul Satie, who was both the company director and my editor, pushed forward and gave a muddled reply. "Yes, welcome, it, er, has been quite some time, hasn't it? Your lovely wife is just as...no, I mean, in fact she's even more dazzling than ever. That must be what they call the newlywed aura, yes? Ha ha, yes, I'm rather jealous!"

A year younger than Lord Simeon, he was relatively young for a company owner. He was also engaged to my former maid, Natalie.

"You're very kind. I understand wedding bells are on the horizon for you as well, incidentally. Congratulations."

"Oh, thank you! Although it's a marriage between two poor commoners, so I'm sure it won't compare to yours."

"The fine lady you're marrying took care of Marielle since childhood. I know

her from my visits to House Clarac as well, so I'd definitely like to congratulate you with a suitable gift. However, I'm afraid I have no tact when it comes to these matters, so rather than thinking of something on my own, I feel it might be best to ask you. If there's anything you'd like for your new home, please tell me."

"Oh my," said Mr. Satie, laughing nervously. "That's far more than we deserve."

Though this looked like an amiable conversation, it was rapidly making my editor turn pale. His smile was also looking more strained by the second. As a cold sweat ran over him, he gave a gesture that I took to mean I should offer Lord Simeon a chair. *I'm a visitor too, you know!*

Still, I did so and then left my husband behind, telling him I needed to give Mr. Satie the manuscript.

After directing an employee to serve Lord Simeon some tea, Mr. Satie moved us as far from him as possible, then whispered, "What's he doing here? Does he have some problem with my company?! It may be on the small side, but I assure you it's a legitimate, financially solvent business!"

"You don't need to cower in fear. He's not a wild animal." I thrust the envelope containing the manuscript into his hands. "We've gone out together today, that's all. He offered to join me himself. It was a pleasant surprise."

"Hmm. Well, the city is getting quite dangerous these days, so I'm sure he's worried about you. Who knows what trouble you'd get yourself into if left to your own devices."

After making this rude remark, Mr. Satie took the manuscript out of the envelope. Pouting, I sat in the nearest chair.

"I swear! All I want to do is go shopping and take a stroll. It's all perfectly normal. What was that about the city getting dangerous, though? Has there been some sort of incident?"

"More incidents than you can count are occurring every single day. This is Sans-Terre, the royal capital—and we're on the verge of war."

"Not us. Other countries."

“Yes, but Lagrange is sending reinforcements. Plenty of people object to that, and they’re making sure everyone knows it. They’ve been holding anti-war rallies in the streets, making loud proclamations. There are violent clashes when the police come to break them up. Sometimes people are injured. If you see any of these rallies, steer well clear. It’s not safe.”

This man had raised me from a novice to an experienced author, and even now he talked to me less like a business partner and more like a teacher.

I turned to look at Lord Simeon. *Ah, I see. So that’s why he insisted on coming along.*

My husband was having a chat with the employee who had served him the tea. Lord Simeon knew him already; it was Lord Michel, the illegitimate son of Marquess Montagnier, who now lived and worked here in the city. He seemed daunted by Lord Simeon as well, but to his credit, he was able to face him with far more composure than the others.

“Anyway, I’ll give this a read through before our next meeting. It’s a bit of a wait, but you mind if we make it the tenth of next month? I have an awful lot of accounting work on my plate right now.”

“That’s fine for me. Shall I drop in around the same time?”

“Oh, I’ll visit you at home. I know it’s a bit more difficult for you to go into the city these days.”

He once again stole a glance at Lord Simeon. No doubt he believed my movements were being restricted.

“Honestly, that’s not necessary. As long as there’s nothing I absolutely must be doing at home, no one will keep me from going out.”

“Are you sure? Your husband seems to be following closely behind you and wielding his authority for everyone to see. It sounds like he was quite insistent about coming today.”

“I know how Lord Simeon looks sometimes, but he doesn’t have any ulterior motive. He has a shrewd gaze and an imposing pressure because he’s a military officer, that’s all. He’s actually a very kind person. He even wishes my cat liked him better.”

“Oh yes, cats can be so soothing.”

I explained that there was no reason for him to make such a fuss about me, and that I would visit his office for our next meeting as well. Making such a busy man journey all the way to the outskirts would have been quite unfair to him. And, unlike when he'd visited my family's home in the past, it wouldn't have doubled as a chance to see Natalie.

With a goodbye to Lord Michel and the other employees, I left with Lord Simeon in tow. We traversed the narrow street in front of the shared office building and returned to our carriage on the main road. As we walked, I made a suggestion.

“Why don't we send the carriage home? I'd like to walk around the city on my own two feet. We can always call a fiacre later.”

Now that I was back in the city at last, seeing it from the window of a carriage felt like a waste. That thought had struck me as we'd flown past the cityscape earlier. Even though it had only been a few months since I'd last been there, new shops had opened and new signs had been put out. The urban scenery changed with the seasons, and I wanted to see it all.

“You're planning to walk along the bank of the Latour and visit Petibon, aren't you? Are you certain you can walk that far?”

“If I get worn out, the option of a fiacre is always there. That's what they're for.”

These carriages that could be hired for a cheap fare ran all throughout the city. You could flag them down anywhere, so there was never any trouble getting around. Since you didn't need to find a place to park every time you stopped, it was more convenient than a private carriage in some ways. The only downside was that they offered a much less comfortable ride.

Browbeaten by my insistence, Lord Simeon agreed with a reluctant half-smile. We briefly returned to the carriage and told the driver to go home. After watching him depart, I turned around. “Well then, let's set off. First, crepes from Chardin Square!”

I clung to Lord Simeon's arm and started walking toward the center of the

city.

Being a renowned tourist destination, Sans-Terre had many famous sights, but Chardin Square was among the most celebrated of all. A number of long streets radiated from it, connecting to every corner of the city. It was the starting point, or perhaps the ending point, of every route.

Until a hundred years ago, executions had been carried out here. Even royalty had been beheaded in this square. Behind its charming appearance lay a surprisingly bloodstained history.

There was no sign of that these days, however. It was a lively tourist spot and nothing more. Upon arriving, I looked around for a particular crepe stand, only to see a sizable crowd gathered in one corner of the square. I thought they might be watching a street performer, but I soon knew otherwise. The voices floating on the breeze were not the buoyant cheers of an appreciative audience.

“Is that one of the street rallies Mr. Satie was talking about?”

Before I’d even said it, Lord Simeon had noticed the assembly himself. His pretty face screwed up into a grimace.

After a pause, I inquired, “Would you mind if I go over and look, just for a moment?”

“Marielle,” he said, turning to me and glaring with his light blue eyes.

Hurriedly, I added, “I won’t get too close. Just enough to hear what they’re saying. It’s not just idle curiosity, I’ll have you know. As a nation, I think we should take an interest in this kind of thing.”

“There’s no need for you to have any interest in it,” he said, flatly dismissing my point.

I frowned in dissatisfaction. “Are you saying that you, too, believe women should only care about matters inside their own homes?”

“I’m not suggesting that. But gatherings of this sort are just a group of radicals making extreme assertions. It’s not a legitimate speech.”

“I fail to see how you can know that without actually listening to it.”

Lord Simeon silently shook his head. *That's a firm no, then.*

It's not that I had any desire to support an anti-war rally. I'd been told the reasons why Lagrange was sending its troops. However, people like this—activists, would you call them?—were never seen in the world of the nobility, so I couldn't help being intrigued. *Lord Simeon is with me, so surely it would have been all right to get just a tiny bit closer, wouldn't it?*

With some lingering regret, I glanced at the crowd again. As I did, I noticed someone standing nearby and looking our way. When my eyes met his, I gasped. I recognized the handsome face with its bountiful goatee.

Lord Simeon noticed the man as well. Seeing this, the man decided to approach us.

"What an unexpected place to bump into you," he said. His low voice had an abundance of masculine charm. His manner of walking had a firm strength to it as well. I felt myself break into a joyous smile. *So he's made a full recovery.*

The meeting was a surprise to me as well. This man was rarely seen out and about like this.

He was a noble like us, but with the loftier rank of marquess. His eyes, a subdued shade, looked at me with calm kindness. Before, when I'd harbored an impression of him as dangerously power-hungry, I hadn't looked on him too favorably. Now that I knew he had a pure and righteous core, I had a great deal of respect for him.

Marquess Rafale extended his hand to me. Perceiving his intention, I responded by offering my hand in return, which he courteously lifted up to deliver a kiss of greeting.

"Good day, Mrs. Flaubert."

"Good day." Then, in belated surprise, I added, "Oh, you know who I am."

I'd almost left it as a straightforward reply, but it had suddenly occurred to me that this was the first time he and I had met under anything resembling normal circumstances. The last time I'd seen him, he'd been at death's door after suffering a major stab wound. I'd been there by pure happenstance, and I'd have assumed he was in no condition to notice who I was. Given my

tendency not to stick in people's memories at the best of times, it came as rather a shock that he knew my name.

I know him very well, of course. Maybe it's just that he saw me with Lord Simeon and assumed I must be his wife? That was an awfully familiar greeting if so, however.

As if to answer the questions swimming in my mind, Marquess Rafale smiled and said, "I've wanted to thank you properly. You saved my life, so it's unpardonable that it's taken until today. Allow me to express my sincerest gratitude."

"Saved your life? I fear you may be exaggerating. I didn't do anything as grand as that."

"If you hadn't called for help, I wouldn't be here today. When I spoke to you at the time, my mind was too addled to think properly, but the criminals who stabbed me had only just left and were still nearby. I was asking you to put yourself in danger. I can only apologize."

"Please, don't worry. I must say, I'm surprised by how well you remember it all."

More than surprised, I was impressed. Considering the unimaginable pain he'd been in, it was especially remarkable that he recognized me. *I suppose an influential politician would have exceptional force of will and power of memory.* My opinion of him continued to rise.

"I heard you were attacked and came to harm as well," he added. "I'm so sorry. It's all my fault."

"You honestly don't need to feel guilty, Marquess. The criminals are to blame, not you. Besides, my wound wasn't all that serious, and it's long since healed. Everything's fine."

Laughing gently to underline this, I tried to pull my hand away, but the marquess held on and wouldn't let go. His eyes, filled with intelligence and zeal, continued to stare fixedly at me. *Why is he looking at me like that? There's something tremendously vehement about his expression.* Behind my smile, I was quite perturbed. I didn't understand why this man would show me such a face.

Before that incident, he had never been aware of me even when I'd walked right past him. Had his memory of the incident become embellished in his mind somehow? All I'd done was run and get help. The royal guards were the ones who had actually helped him at the scene, and it was the doctors, of course, who had worked flat out to bring him back to full health. If he owed anyone his life, it was them. Events may have played out rather differently in his recollection, however.

Frozen there with a tense smile, I heard a very intentional-sounding clearing of the throat from above my head. The marquess's gaze moved upward. His pleasant smile promptly slipped away to a frigid, prickly expression.

"Good day, Marquess. Unexpected indeed to find you here. Are you participating in the rally?"

Lord Simeon's voice was equally cold. I knew what face he was making without even looking. A hint of a smile combined with the sharp, penetrating gaze that only the Demon Vice Captain was capable of. *Oh my, just imagining it makes me quiver. The vicious smile of the brutal military officer is right there next to me!*

"Will you jump on any cause as long as it's critical of His Majesty? Given your fixation on reforming the government, it is only fitting that you'd involve yourself in audacious acts that so conflict with the image of a nobleman. To us, it's unimaginable for one with the rank of marquess to be in league with such a disreputable band."

My word, he truly didn't hold anything back. He struck with such unvarnished enmity that the aftershock could freeze me solid!

Lord Simeon wrapped an arm around me. As he drew me toward him, the marquess's hand pulled away. The marquess stood up straight again and replied with no sign he was bothered by the Demon Vice Captain's scathing remark.

"I'd prefer not to deem them 'disreputable' before I know anything about the situation, but beyond that, I'm afraid I'm a mere passerby. Well, perhaps that's not entirely accurate. Admittedly, I did come here because I was curious. I've been wondering what these rallies involve."

His own tone became quite cutting.

“To be quite honest with you, I think it’s only natural that there’d be strong criticism. His Majesty and the top brass of the military are approaching this with a mentality that oversteps the bounds of self-defense. If we were only sending reinforcements, I would have no objections either, but when it goes beyond that—”

“Marquess.”

Lord Simeon’s voice, even deeper and more pointed than before, interrupted Marquess Rafale’s words. I was intrigued to hear what he had been about to say, but the heavy air made it clear I shouldn’t interject.

The marquess changed his tone, having apparently reconsidered and decided this wasn’t a topic to discuss openly in public. “Since you also happen to be here, why don’t you put your preconceptions to one side and listen as well? These people making such a fuss are only responding to what’s been revealed officially, but surely the public’s reactions shouldn’t be dismissed out of hand. I say we need to stop looking only at distant benefits and focus on concerns closer to home.”

“I’m terribly sorry,” Lord Simeon replied nonchalantly, “but I’m enjoying a stroll with my wife.” He made a display of bringing his face closer to my hair. “She was wounded, as you mentioned. For that reason among others, we’ve been rather housebound lately, so we want to savor our day out as much as we can. We’d rather not throw a damper on it with this boorish business.”

Excuse me? I think you’ll find that I wanted to go and see the rally. Don’t use me as a scapegoat.

I couldn’t make my husband lose face, however, so I maintained a smile and suffered through it. *You’ll get your just deserts later, though. I hope you know that.*

I thought the marquess would snort at this, but instead, he fell silent with a sullen expression. *How puzzling. When it’s a difficult topic, he has a reply ready on the spot, but a remark as trifling as that has left him lost for words? Now that I recall, he is single, so perhaps he’s feeling jealous and hard done by. It reminds me of a certain crown prince I know.*

For a brief moment, the two silently glared at one another. Being caught in

the middle of this, I couldn't have felt more uncomfortable.

They were enemies in the political sphere, in a manner of speaking. Lord Simeon had sworn fealty to the royal family, and Marquess Rafale led the reformist faction, which wanted to abolish the monarchy. Some discord was par for the course. That said, Lord Simeon generally didn't start recklessly picking fights even with his worst enemies. Typically he just gave them the cold shoulder. This sort of nakedly hostile war of words was rare.

As far as I know, the only one Lord Simeon actively argues with is that notorious thief. Is there some factor that he and the marquess have in common? They seem like very different people to me.

I wasn't sure if I should forcibly pull Lord Simeon away or just watch quietly, but in the end there was no need to decide. The voices from the crowd suddenly became frenzied, and the two men stopped scowling at each other and turned to look.

A police squadron had entered the square. A skirmish had begun between the officers and the activists of the kind Mr. Satie had described.

The uninvolved bystanders nearby, scared of getting mixed up in it, started running away. Actually, some were also moving closer, eager to watch the proceedings. Lord Simeon's arm held onto me more forcefully.

"Let's go," he said.

With only a curt bow to Marquess Rafale, he started heading out of the square. Pulled along with him, I also offered a hurried nod. The marquess returned the greeting only to me.

"Oh, the crepe stand! Lord Simeon, wait!"

"They sell them elsewhere too, don't they? We should get away from here quickly."

"But I want to get the famous tricolor crepe filled with cream, custard cream, and chocolate cream!" I'd finally found it, and now Lord Simeon wouldn't even stop.

"Just hearing that makes me nauseous. Won't it simply be a huge mass of

cream? How could you even eat it?"

"They say that not being able to eat cream is a sign of old age, you know."

He balked. "Even when I was a child, that would have been too much for me."

While bickering with him, I stole a glance back at the marquess. He was still looking straight at me. As I remembered the strangely familiar attitude he'd shown me, the doubts I'd almost forgotten resurfaced.

"What's wrong?" Lord Simeon asked, reluctantly walking back toward the crepe stand.

"Nothing. I was just thinking about how different the marquess seems. Did his injury spur some change in his mindset?"

A pause. "Who knows."

"He greeted me in a very familiar way, even though today was essentially our first proper meeting. The marquess is so intently focused on his political aspirations that not only is he not married, but no rumors ever crop up associating him with any women. I thought he might have an aversion to them, but that doesn't seem to be the case."

Today's scuffle with the police didn't look like it would lead to any arrests, as the anti-war rally had quickly dispersed. Marquess Rafale walked off as well, going in a different direction than we had. I kept glancing at him as we walked—until suddenly, my hand hurt. When I looked, Lord Simeon was using a handkerchief to rub the place the marquess's lips had touched.

"Stop it. That hurts."

"Marielle, you have to be careful not to offer him any hint of provocation. Even if it's not your intention, there's a risk that your words and attitude may be misinterpreted. You must clearly demonstrate that you have no interest in him."

"What are you talking about?"

When I lifted my head, I was met with an excessively serious gaze.

"This again?" I said with a sigh. "No normal gentleman even sees me as a woman in that sense. Besides, he's closer to my father's age than mine. There's

no chance he has the slightest interest in me.”

“That’s definitely not—in fact, yes. You’re right. He is indeed an older man. *Much* older. He could never be suitable for you.”

Lord Simeon had been about to say something, but then quickly changed tack. *He’s putting a lot of emphasis on the marquess’s age. As I said, though, he has no interest in me to begin with!* My husband certainly was prone to jealousy. Bothersome though it was, I broke out into a grin. *Oh dear, it’s just far too adorable. Even though he’s completely off the mark, he’s earnestly worried about it.*

Of course, Lord Simeon himself was an unimaginable romantic match for me. He was a flower blooming on a dizzyingly high peak—something to be gazed at from a distance but never touched. That he had become my fiancé and then my husband was so strange it could only be called a miracle.

For him to ignore his own resplendent beauty in favor of worrying about his plain wife felt utterly topsy-turvy. It was so cute, and so funny, that I couldn’t even follow up on the point that had intrigued me about their earlier exchange. *Well, never mind. It’s probably nothing I’d be able to discuss in detail anyway.*

“Now, here we are,” said Lord Simeon. “The tricolor crepe, was it?”

We had arrived at the stand, which was painted white and red and enveloped by an overpowering sweet scent. Pictures of crepes were displayed on a signboard in front. *Lord Simeon seems so wonderfully mismatched with this cutesy scene! A dashing handsome man who exudes dignity, presence, and expert skill, standing next to a crepe stand! The extreme contrast is making my fangirl heart dance on air!* It was such a rare sight that even the nearby tourists and pairs of lovers turned to look.

“Oh, I don’t want the tricolor anymore. I’d like them to add chestnut cream.”

“Add it? So you want four types of cream?! Surely it’ll taste appalling!”

“Two, please. One for me, and one for the gentleman.”

“I’ll never be able to eat it!”

“Oh dear, I suppose you must be an old man after all.”

He groaned. Through gritted teeth, he uttered, “Two please.”

His expression was as bitter as if he’d just cut his way deep into enemy territory. I suppressed a laugh. *This is payback for using me as an excuse!*

I held off on telling him that it would all be fine. These crepes weren’t designed to be eaten all in one go; the layers of cream would be revealed one by one. The amount of each flavor was also rather small. All this was a surprise for him to discover when he ate it.

The rest of the afternoon was uneventful. I simply wandered around all over the place as planned. Shopping was followed by a long overdue visit to the Three Flowers, and overall, I had a delightful day. Lord Simeon was beside me the entire time, and when I looked over at him, I was met with a kind gaze. Wherever I went, and whatever I did, I was filled with the satisfaction of enjoying a date with my husband. By the time we set off for home, the sun was low in the sky.

All that walking had tired me out, so the shaking of the carriage lulled me to sleep. It wasn’t the wheels, but the rhythmic pace of the horse’s long strides. Rather than sitting uncomfortably in the fiacre’s awkward seat, I had rested in my husband’s strong arms. The most inviting warmth in the world had surrounded me and carried me safely home.

When I next opened my eyes, it was time to get out. As I lifted my head in a daze, I heard his voice right beside me. “Are you awake? We’re home already.”

In my drowsy state, the most I could manage as a response was an unintelligible mumble. He chuckled furtively, then I felt a soft sensation on my forehead.

“You can carry on sleeping. I hardly blame you for being exhausted after walking for so long. Given how little exercise you normally do, I’m sure you’ll be aching all over tomorrow.”

I yawned audibly several times before awareness finally returned to me. Then I mumbled in surprise as I saw that we’d already reached the front door. Darting my head around, I saw that the servants were carrying the bags in rather than Lord Simeon, whose hands were full.

“Oh my, I’m sorry! I’ll get down now! Put me down, please!”

Despite my flustered request, Lord Simeon held on even more tightly. “How cruel. Why not let me bask in the sight of your lovely sleeping face?”

“Lovely? You must be joking! And it’s a rather mean joke at that!”

“I wouldn’t have said it if I didn’t mean it. You looked exactly like Chouchou when she’s sleeping with her belly stretched out.”

“Was I lying on my back?!”

Ugh, this must be his revenge for the crepes. When I let out a bitter groan, he began to laugh. Even the servants chuckled quietly, making my face flush.

He walked through the door with me still in his arms. Inside, we were greeted by my mother-in-law, Countess Estelle.

“Ah, you’re back.”

I clapped Lord Simeon on the shoulder to make him put me down. “Yes!” I replied awkwardly. “Good evening!”

Countess Estelle clearly hadn’t descended to the first floor just to say hello to us. The servants around her were moving about industriously, and listening carefully, I sensed a flurried aura in the manor as a whole.

Inevitably noticing this as well, Lord Simeon asked, “Is something wrong?”

His mother had been about to climb the staircase again, but she turned back. “We just received an urgent letter. Your great aunt from House Lespinasse passed away.”

“Her time finally came.”

“Yes. I thought she’d hold on until she reached a hundred, but she didn’t quite get there.”

House Lespinasse was one of the families related to House Flaubert. They owned land in a region called Mauge situated some distance from the capital. *The lady of House Lespinasse. If I recall, she was the younger sister of Lord Simeon’s great grandfather.*

“If we hurry we’ll arrive in time for the funeral, so your father and I are setting

off with Noel first thing tomorrow morning. It would be lovely if you could join us, but...”

She let the words hang in the air vaguely. Lord Simeon shook his head.

“I’m afraid I can’t take the time off work.”

“As I thought. Never mind. Just be sure to write a card expressing your condolences and I’ll bring it along.”

She readily accepted this, having apparently had no hope of him coming at all. Then she turned her attention to me.

“What about you, Marielle? House Lespinasse gave a gift when you got married, so ideally at least one of you should attend.”

“Yes, I’ll come with you.”

It made sense. Lord Simeon’s inability to go to the funeral only made it more important for his wife to be there. Shaking off my lethargy, I hurried upstairs to pack. Joanna, knowledgeable as always, helped me along with the other maids.

“I brought a set of mourning clothes and accessories when I moved in,” I told her. “My parents gave them to me before I got married. Those should be entirely suitable.”

“Don’t worry,” Joanna replied. “We’ve put it all in there together so we can bring it out easily.”

My dressing room was overflowing with dresses and accessories. My mother-in-law, who lived for fashion, had ordered one item after another, so I no longer had any idea where anything was. The maids, however, were far better acquainted with the contents of my wardrobe and managed to retrieve exactly what I needed.

I’d be staying there for a few days, so several suitcases were crammed full with changes of clothes. Once those were carried away, I could finally take a bath and get ready for bed. After walking all day, my exhaustion left me stumbling giddily into the bedroom.

I’m so tired. I wonder if Lord Simeon’s still bathing? I want to wait up for him, but I’m close to passing out.

I climbed into bed without him. He'd told me I'd be aching all over tomorrow, but my legs were already beginning to hurt. The journey to Mauge was looking to be a tough one.

After crawling across the vast bed, I finally reached the pillow with a groan of relief. The moment I turned into my usual sleeping position, I began to drift off.

My husband entered at that moment. Unwilling to pretend I hadn't heard him and let myself fall asleep, I fought against my fatigue and opened my eyes.

"Good night."

"Wait, Marielle. Would you mind listening to me for a moment?"

All I managed in response was a faint murmur. I was so tired that I almost felt sick, and it had taken all my effort to wish him good night. Now he wanted me to listen. *I hope you realize I won't take any of it in!* I scowled despite my best intentions.

"Mauge is quite different from Sans-Terre. It's a countryside region. There are mountains close to House Lespinasse's manor, and a number of rivers and ponds as well. You absolutely must not stray from the main paths, all right?"

"Yes," I whimpered vaguely.

Oh, I see. A typical lecture. No sooner did I have that thought than my eyelids began to droop again. Hearing my half-asleep response, Lord Simeon shook my shoulder.

"Are you listening? In any case, you shouldn't go roaming about too much. Try to stay quietly indoors, and only go out if you have a male escort. To be clear, that should be someone who can protect you. Noel or my father won't suffice; it should be someone more physically capable." To himself, he added, "If only Adrien's departure had been a few days later."

I wonder how Lord Adrien's doing? He grumbled a lot, but hopefully he's having a good time on the rainbow island. I wonder if he's met the pirates yet. Thinking about it, he and Sasha are rather alike in some ways. The cat-eyed pirate and the big dog! Or should that be the cute little puppy?

My thoughts rapidly faded. Lord Simeon's voice grew more distant as well. I threw myself into the sea of sleep's warm waves and allowed myself to sink.

Chapter Four

The funeral service was held under a somber gray sky that looked like it could erupt again at any moment.

Maugne was suffering from abnormally bad weather. It had been raining when we arrived, in fact. To the local residents' relief, the grape harvest had already finished by the time the weather had taken this turn, but there was universal agreement that they hoped it would stop soon. Wine production was the region's main industry, so they were particularly fearful that the ongoing rain would make a lot of the workers ill at this critical juncture.

In addition, there had been disconcerting side-effects such as the rivers rising to a dangerous level and small landslides occurring. If the rain led to a serious natural disaster, lives could be lost, so everyone spent their days looking up at the sky with great concern.

One voice stood in great contrast to this. After the funeral, a boy from House Lespinasse cheerfully asked Lord Noel to follow him.

"Noel, come and see! The River Tanta's so deep now! There's no way you've ever seen anything like it! Come on!"

"Can't we get changed first? It's a pain to walk through the mud in these shoes."

As befitting of a young nobleman from the city, Lord Noel was concerned about how muddy it was. However, he was entirely enthusiastic about the venture itself. No doubt he was both curious about the country environment he rarely got to see and excited to play with his cousin. Even though he was nearly sixteen and liked to insist he was one of the grown-ups now, he was still a little rascal at heart.

"Leon! I told you to stay away from the rivers!"

"Noel, don't wander off on your own. I brought you because you said you were enough of a grown-up, so I certainly hope you don't need a nanny

watching you.”

The boys’ curiosity was quickly punctured by their mothers. Under strict orders to go straight back to the manor, the pair walked with sullen expressions. *I wonder if they’ll actually obey. They wouldn’t secretly slip away, would they?*

I could understand their interest. Truth be told, I wanted to go and look as well. A muddy river rushing by at a terrifying pace—that was a sight I’d only read about in books, and I wanted to know exactly what it looked like. When it rained heavily in Sans-Terre, I’d been prevented from going out, so I’d never been able to see a river or, indeed, anything else in those conditions. If I had a chance to see the real thing with my own eyes, I wanted to take it. How else could I make such scenes truly impactful for my readers?

It’s not safe, though, I realize. Lord Simeon even warned me. He said there are a lot of rivers and ponds, and I should be extra careful.

I had the feeling he might have said something else, but I couldn’t quite recall. The gist was that he’d given a typical lecture about how I shouldn’t do anything dangerous. My overprotective husband continued to be true to himself.

I’m nineteen years old. I’m an adult capable of exercising good judgment. Indeed, I’m a married woman now, so I won’t act the same way as those boys. I shall make do with looking from a safe distance. I’ll have to ask about it later.

After telling off their sons, the two mothers chatted as they walked.

“He looks like an adult on the outside, but he’s very much still a child underneath. The other day he climbed onto the roof of the water mill and fell off quite spectacularly. He didn’t suffer any serious injury, thank God, but he certainly didn’t learn his lesson either.”

“Boys are always acting impulsively. Our Adrien was always acting the fool and hurting himself. If Simeon hadn’t been there, he’d be six feet under by now.”

While the sudden passing of a younger person would be a grave misfortune, the loss of a lady nearing one hundred years of age hadn’t caused any great upset. Though there were touches of sadness, the prevailing feeling was that

she had found peace after a life well lived. People were smiling as they shared memories of the deceased and asked about recent developments in each other's lives.

I walked alone at the back of the group. Having only just married into the family, I had met these relatives only once or twice at most. Without anyone there I was close to, it was difficult to break into their conversations. Deciding it would be better to stay behind and avoid butting in, I kept quiet and was promptly forgotten about, as expected. All the ladies were wearing similar black dresses, so I blended right in. I felt like I had before I was engaged, when I typically stood at a distance from the crowd and observed my surroundings and the people in them.

The large graveyard behind the church was well-maintained and the atmosphere was far from gloomy. The gravestones were so varied in shape that each one was interesting to look at. As I slowly walked along, I noticed a grave with flowers laid on it. It was small, and all the flowers were white. *Does that mean it was a child? The death of someone so young is a tragedy indeed.*

I stopped in front of the grave and offered a prayer. *Rest in peace.* So many bouquets had been set down that they almost covered the gravestone, and other items such as stuffed toys were mixed in among them. Just by looking, I could feel the love and grief of the bereaved.

One of the bouquets appeared to have been knocked over by the wind, so I stood it back up again. After arranging the stuffed toys neatly as well and making sure everything was tidy, I looked up again and saw a figure in the window of the building before me.

That must be the priest's living quarters. It wasn't the priest himself, but it was a grown man. As he stared out of the window, I had the feeling he was looking in my direction. *Priests don't get married, so it can't be a son of his. Maybe it's a helper at the church?*

I stared absentmindedly for a few moments, then the curtain was pulled closed and I could no longer see the man. *Is there really any need to draw the curtains during weather like this? It's as though he's telling me to stop looking. Perhaps I was being rude, but then he was looking at me first—unless I was*

mistaken about that.

Feeling unsettled, I stood up. The moment I did, footsteps approached.

“Is something the matter?”

This softly spoken man, at least fifty years of age and dressed in vestments, was the priest who had led the funeral service.

“No, thank you.” I shook my head lightly and collected myself. “This grave—is it a child’s?”

The priest looked down at the grave and nodded. “Yes. He was eight years old. He caught a cold because of the rain, and then his condition worsened. It was only a few days ago.”

“Oh, I see. His poor parents.”

Though in some cases the bereaved at a funeral were saying goodbye to a great-grandparent who’d lived a life spanning close to a hundred years, in other cases they were tearfully parting with a child who hadn’t even reached the age of ten. Fate could be so cruel sometimes.

A drop hit the brim of my hat. When I looked up, more cold raindrops fell on my cheeks. The sky was finally unable to hold it in any longer, and the thrumming noise echoed all around.

“It’s started again,” said the priest. “You’d better hurry back so you don’t catch a cold yourself.”

“Yes, indeed. Goodbye.”

With a curtsy, I hurried out of the graveyard.

It wasn’t even a ten-minute walk back to the manor, but the rain grew heavier while I was en route. The townspeople dashed under their eaves for shelter, and I started running. By the time I reached my destination, it was truly a downpour.

Far from stopping, the rain only grew ever more intense after that. Even Lord Noel and his cousin gave up on their plan to play outside and entertained themselves with games indoors.

When evening came, the sky was already pitch dark at the hour the sun would normally just be setting. I gazed out of the window. Behind the rain that showed absolutely no sign of letting up, the mountains blended into the darkness.

Suddenly, I heard a commotion downstairs.

I left the room and made for the staircase. A member of the house was there, so I asked what was going on.

With a disgruntled expression, she replied, "More guests have arrived."

"In this rain? Has there been some sort of emergency?"

"I'm afraid I have no idea."

It was a young lady around my age who had married into House Lespinasse. She responded in quite an unfriendly manner, though, putting to rest any idea that our similar circumstances might allow for pleasant conversation between us. *That's not entirely surprising given my own nature, I suppose.* Still, I decided that since we were now family, I should try to establish at least some sort of connection with her, so I did my best to keep the conversation going.

"It wasn't someone from the town, was it? I'd hate to think something awful might have happened because of the rain."

"No, it's nothing like that. The heir to House Flaubert has arrived with his men."

"I see, the heir to House... Oh!"

My casual, conversational tone vanished when I realized what she had said. *The heir to House Flaubert?!*

"Lord Simeon is here?"

I parted ways with the young lady and rushed down the stairs. In the foyer stood a group of people soaked through to the bone. Though their usual gallant and dignified aura was entirely missing, their uniforms were undoubtedly those of the royal guards.

There among the group was my husband.

“Lord Simeon!”

Servants were rushing about attempting to dry them off. I slipped between them, careful to avoid getting in their way, and approached the dripping wet group. My husband, who was busy wiping down his uniform, raised his head.

“Hello, Marielle.”

“What are you doing here? I thought you couldn’t come because of work.” I paused as I realized that he’d come in uniform, accompanied by his men. “Ah, I see. You’re working right now. Still, how did you end up here?”

He had stowed his glasses, which were too wet to be of any use, in his breast pocket. I retrieved them and wiped them with my handkerchief.

“Thank you,” he replied, putting them back on. “The rain started while we were traveling. I remembered that House Lespinasse lived nearby, so I came and asked them if we could take shelter here.”

His blond hair was soaked. I stood on my tiptoes and tried to dry off where it clung to the back of his neck.

“You must be freezing. You need to get straight to a warm room. In fact, a warm bath would be better. We’ll need to find you a change of clothes, too. Perhaps you could borrow some from your father.”

“His would be too small for me. There’s no need to worry, in any case. This isn’t more than I can cope with.”

“Don’t put on a brave face. The nights are getting cold now. If you’re not careful, you’ll catch a cold, and then where will you be?”

“I’m not nearly as weak as that.”

“Pride comes before a fall, you know.”

Laughing with a look of mild annoyance, he lowered my hand. As if to tell me I didn’t need to stretch up to reach him, he bent down and brought his gaze closer.

“You must realize I’m not the only one who’s wet. We’re all tired, so the first priority is having something warm to eat.”

“Of course. Everyone should rest in a room with a fireplace, and eat something hearty. I imagine they’ve started working in the kitchens already.”

“Indeed. Also—”

But before Lord Simeon could finish his sentence, an angry voice interrupted.

“*Must* you keep on with your newlywed lovebird act?” said the black-haired man. “I find it highly objectionable!”

I turned to look, then turned away a moment later. “Oh dear, I must have come down with something. I’m seeing things. Strange things indeed.”

“Strange?!” the man replied. “What a beastly thing to say! Besides, didn’t you say you’ve never caught so much as a cold in your life?”

“I’m hearing voices too.”

“Are you so determined to deny my very existence? After all the help I’ve afforded you, that’s no way to show your gratitude.”

“Surely it’s the other way around. Remind me who brought an end to your long years of lovelorn disappointment and united you with your darling fiancée?”

“I did! I worked jolly hard and proposed to Julianne myself!”

“But I’m the one who made sure the queen was on your side.”

“And I’m certainly grateful, but—hold on! You *do* know it’s me, then!”

Unbelievable though it was, mixed in among the royal guards and just as drenched as the rest of the party was His Highness the Crown Prince himself. He looked as gallant as the rest in high-laced boots and an outfit with a military flair, but his features were unmistakable, with the black hair characteristic of his royal blood and an appearance so dashing he could give Lord Simeon a run for his money. I’d assumed he was still at Ventvert Palace, the familiar royal residence in faraway Sans-Terre, but for some reason he had come to visit this distant rural manor.

As he grumbled at me, the prince rubbed his wet hair with a towel. It seemed best to curtsy politely. “Honestly, it would seem odd for the royal guards to be dispatched this far from the capital without a member of the royal family to

guard. In terms of who it could be, you seemed good enough I suppose.”

““Good enough I suppose’? A fine thing to say to a prince.”

“I still feel it would be best to deny it, however. Can’t we say it’s a perfect body double?”

“Why the need to deny my presence? What a harrowing fate for me to suffer!”

“Look around, though.”

I turned slightly. The lord and lady of the manor were standing stock still, horrified. The servants who had realized there was a prince before them were in the same state. Their faces were turning pale.

As mentioned previously, this was a rural area. This territory in the northeast of Lagrange consisted mainly of fields, fields, and more fields, surrounded by mountains. Even though the landowner was related to an esteemed house, that didn’t mean any of the locals, including those from House Lespinasse itself, were used to directly interacting with the royal family. If the crown prince turned up on their doorstep with no prior warning, of course they would struggle to come to terms with it. They were inevitably left in a state of panic over how to welcome such a lofty guest and whether their humble abode would be able to offer all he expected.

If they could treat him as a body double instead, perhaps it would lighten their mental load. It’s not the most practical idea though, I’ll admit.

“You’re essentially another natural disaster on top of the rain,” I added, sighing.

Lord Simeon lightly rapped me on the head and chided me. “Honestly, Marielle.”

He then went to Lady Lespinasse and began explaining the situation. I took a fresh towel from a petrified maid and started drying off His Highness’s back.

“You must have ridden on horseback rather than in carriages to be in this state.”

“We were in rather a hurry.”

“What on earth has happened? This can’t be a small matter for you to personally go racing off into the countryside.”

He paused for a moment. “I’m sorry, but I can’t share the details. Please don’t ask.”

The firm tone in his voice made me stop moving my hand for a moment. When I glanced around at the knights, none of them would meet my eyes.

I nodded. *Ah, I see. It’s one of those situations.*

“Very well. I’ll take your secret with me to the grave, Your Highness. I’ll pretend I didn’t see a thing.”

“Why did you phrase it like that? What are you suggesting? I don’t have any secret to be ashamed of! Wait, where did that notebook come from and what are you writing in it?!”

While we were talking, Lord Simeon’s parents came over and managed to calm down the family members and staff. Despite the frenzy, preparations to host the new guests were completed and the party was led to the second floor. There, a single guest room had been prepared in a hurry, into which His Highness, Lord Simeon, and the twelve accompanying knights were crammed. The manor wasn’t overly large to begin with, and they had many overnight guests for the funeral already, so that was all they could spare. The lord and lady were quite concerned about not being able to offer more.

“You’ve secured a bed for His Highness, and that’s plenty,” said Lord Simeon in an easygoing manner as he removed his soaked jacket. “The rest of us need little more than a blanket each.”

Behind him, the knights made awkward faces. Even for military officers accustomed to camping outdoors, sleeping on the floor would still be a sad fate. *If couches from the rest of the house were gathered together, would that be enough? Perhaps some parlors could be borrowed as extra bedrooms?*

“What if Lord Simeon slept in my room?” I suggested. “That would reduce the number by one, at least.”

“I’m working,” he replied after a moment’s hesitation.

“So? Does that mean you don’t have to sleep? I’m sure it doesn’t make a difference which room you’re sleeping in.”

“I can think of one difference it makes.”

“Hmm?”

For a brief instant, Lord Simeon’s eyes met mine. My cheeks reddened when I caught his meaning.

“I wasn’t thinking about that.”

“*Must* you be so lovey-dovey in front of everyone?!” A vein popped out of His Highness’s head.

The prince was standing by the fire. Clotheslines had been hung across the room; the knights were attaching wet clothes to them while studiously ignoring the exchange between me and my husband.

“It seems frightfully unfair when I can only see Julianne once every five days. Anyway, I’d like to strip off a tad more thoroughly. Could I ask you to give us some privacy, Marielle?”

His tone didn’t brook any disagreement. “Certainly,” I replied, lowering my head before leaving for the time being.

The rest of the manor was still in a state of chaos. It was almost dinner time and there had been a sudden increase in the number of diners, so I could imagine there was quite a commotion in the kitchen as well.

On my way back to my room, I was approached by Lord Noel. “What did Simeon and His Highness say?”

“About what?”

“You know. Why has the prince arrived with the royal guards all of a sudden?”

Curiosity glimmered in his blue eyes. I shook my head. *That’s just what I want to know.* “They wouldn’t tell me. It sounds as though something confidential is afoot, so we should leave them alone as much as possible.”

He huffed. “How boring.”

Though he was a mischievous little devil, he had been raised by a noble

family. He knew when it was appropriate to poke his nose in and when it wasn't. Despite his sullen reaction, he didn't try to argue.

"It must be awful with so many of them in one room," he said instead. "They can have mine as well. I'll share with Leon."

"Are you sure you don't mind? That would be quite a help."

"Tell Simeon he owes me," said Lord Noel with a beaming smile. "I'll make sure he pays me back later!"

I laughed to myself as he walked off. *That shrewd trickster!*

However, my thoughts soon returned to the matter at hand. *What could have happened? Could the war have taken a turn for the worse, with Ortan troops invading Lagrange? No, that can't be. A proper army platoon would have been assembled and dispatched. Also, His Highness wouldn't go to the front line. Those around him would do everything in their power to prevent that.*

I didn't know what else it could be, though. While thinking, I gazed through a window. The wind had grown stronger and was making the glass rattle. At this rate, it would probably pour the whole night through. Everyone would no doubt be worried about the rivers overflowing their banks. I'd heard that if people had to flee, the church would serve as the evacuation site. House Lespinasse had to make preparations to support this effort, which only added to the family and staff's large workload.

Not wanting to burden them any longer than necessary, Lord Simeon's parents had a discussion and agreed that we'd leave as early as the next day, weather permitting.

When I left the dining hall after a modest dinner, I came across Lady Lespinasse talking in the corridor with her daughter-in-law, who I'd met earlier. Before I had time to say anything, the lady of the house noticed me and called my name—sort of.

"Oh! Erm, Marie!"

Not quite, but I'll allow it. "Yes?"

I walked closer, and she pushed the tray in her hands toward me. "You're

close to His Highness, aren't you? Would you mind taking this to him?"

The tray held a teapot and cups. Her eyes implored me. *His Highness is a friendly and affable fellow. You honestly don't need to be so scared of him.*

"Gladly. I'll—"

Before I could take the tray, the younger woman cut in. She went to grab the tray, and the resulting struggle left the tray perilously in danger of dropping. *Careful! Watch out!*

"Your help is not required," Lady Lespinasse insisted to the daughter-in-law. "Go and help somewhere else."

"But you're leaving such an important task in the hands of a guest!"

"When dealing with the crown prince, there is no room for carelessness!"

"I'm capable of this. More so than this gormless fool, anyway!"

They held this argument right in front of me while I watched, unsure how to react.

"Stop butting in," barked the older woman at last. "Marie, take the tray!"

She forced the tray into my hands emphatically enough that I was in no position to object. Though the younger lady was rendered silent, she shot me a withering gaze. With the tray in my hands, I walked away from them in a hurry.

In a family that was shying away from the prince, she was the only one who actively wanted to get close to him. That took a certain courage. *Is it really appropriate, though? Based on her age, she must be recently married—a newlywed like me. Or is there another reason she's interested in him?*

I'd heard that His Highness and Lord Simeon had moved to the room Lord Noel had previously been using, so I made my way there. *The two of them, alone in a separate room. I don't suppose they'll just be quietly resting.*

No one was watching, so I decided to seize my opportunity. I walked up to the closed door with stealthy footsteps, suppressed my presence, and drew myself nearer. *I am air. I am scenery.*

Just a little eavesdropping couldn't hurt, could it? I didn't want to cause any

trouble for my husband or his liege, and I wouldn't share anything I heard. Any situation that prompted His Highness to attend to it personally was unquestionably a serious one indeed. They would never be able to involve an outsider. However, I was too intrigued to hold back any longer. Reassuring myself with an excuse that I would keep whatever I learned locked away inside my heart, I put my ear to the gap between the wall and door and focused all my attention on listening.

Inside, I could hear faint voices.

"...where he is, but in this rain he should be less mobile than expected."

"We must do our utmost to find him before they do," the prince replied.

"Yes. Hopefully he's been able to take shelter somewhere safe. The conditions outside could be extremely dangerous for anyone wandering around."

"Indeed, that's another worry," said His Highness with a sigh. "Dammit, why did he have to do this? Now he's all by himself, and—"

Worryingly, he stopped mid-sentence. *Oh dear. This doesn't bode well.* I stood up straight again and put on a nonchalant expression. A second later, the door opened.

Unsurprisingly, Lord Simeon had opened it. While most people didn't notice me right in front of them if I was surreptitious enough, somehow he had sensed me through a closed door. I was once again enthralled by the Demon Vice Captain.

"Oh, thank you. I've brought tea."

It was no use panicking. With my voice, I tried to convey the idea that I'd only just turned up. I looked up at him with a smile. *I'm so grateful to you for opening the door. My hands are full, see? Look, your wife is smiling at you! You want to be all sweet and loving, don't you?*

He looked down silently with a cold glare.

I have to hold my ground!

"Is something the matter?" I asked with a slight look of confusion.

After a further moment's silence, he shifted his body aside without a word. *Did I get away with it?* I slipped past him and entered the room.

His Highness was sitting on a chair wearing what appeared to be borrowed clothes. A map was spread out over the table depicting the Maigne region and its surroundings.

When I looked over, His Highness folded up the map. "What?"

"Nothing. Those clothes fit you surprisingly well, that's all."

I put the tray down on the now-empty table and poured the tea. My inexperienced serving skills resulted in some leaves finding their way into the cups. *Well, never mind. It's still drinkable.*

"Oh! I see. Well, I'm not a military officer, so there's nothing wrong with being a tad scrawny, surely."

"I wasn't suggesting there was anything wrong with it. It's just interesting that your physique is so similar to my father-in-law's."

"Hmm, there might be more than just muscle on his bones. Wedded bliss increases the waistline, they say. Speaking of which, don't you think Simeon's face has taken on a certain roundness of late?"

Lord Simeon took this attempt at a mean barb with nothing more than a shrug of the shoulders.

"That means you'll get rounder soon as well," I pointed out. "Shall I warn Julianne not to make you too happy?"

"Heavens, no! Anything but that. She's already being so cold to me."

I was the one to deliver a comeback in Lord Simeon's place and secure victory. *Lord Simeon doesn't have any excess anywhere on his body, I'll have you know. I know very, VERY well! Hee hee.*

His Highness slumped forward. "I arranged a secret trip to a bookstore thinking she'd be overjoyed, but she refused me."

"She's preoccupied with everything she has to learn to be a princess," I said while serving him a cup of tea. "It can't be easy, and it's all for her sake. You should be a little more understanding."

Still, perhaps when I get back to Sans-Terre I'll write my friend a letter asking her to be slightly kinder to him.

"Here you go as well, Lord Simeon."

When I offered my husband a cup, he reached out and took it without any sign of displeasure. Inside, I felt a sense of relief.

"Will you be leaving again when the rain dies down? Where will you be going? Or should I refrain from asking that?"

"Even if you ask, we don't have an answer as such," His Highness replied. "It's still up in the air."

"I see. Do you think you'll be able to return to Sans-Terre soon, though?"

The prince screwed up his face. "Marielle, please."

Rushing to clarify, I added, "I'm thinking of writing a letter to Julianne soon, you see. Wouldn't it be better for her to know roughly when you'll be back?"

He shook his head. "I'm afraid nothing's set in stone. I won't be away for months, of course, but I doubt it'll be a matter of a few days either."

"Oh."

When I glanced at Lord Simeon, his gaze had turned fearsome. I gave up on trying to get any information out of them and made myself scarce. *Well, it's not such a surprise that they can't tell me anything.*

Out in the corridor, I reflected on the snippet of conversation I'd heard before entering. They were searching for someone. He was on his own—an individual, not someone who was part of a group. They were worried about his safety, so they probably weren't chasing a criminal they wanted to arrest, though I couldn't be sure of that.

Others were searching for the man too. It sounded as though it would be a serious problem if these others found him first. What was going on? If His Highness had come to join the search himself, there weren't many realistic possibilities.

Quick footsteps followed me. "Marielle."

Resisting the instinct to jump in shock, I quietly took a breath and turned around. My husband's stern face was visible in the dim light of the corridor.

"Yes?"

Though I was aware that feigning ignorance would be futile, I stubbornly did so regardless. He closed the distance in a flash, pressing me against the wall with his hands on either side of my face.

"How much did you hear?" he murmured, bending down to put his face close to mine.

"What do you mean?"

"His Highness told you not to inquire as to why we're here. Have you forgotten already?"

I gulped. *So he caught me after all. Nothing gets past the Demon Vice Captain. My word, he's just as dashing as he is terrifying. The sheer intensity of the brutal, blackhearted military officer is setting my heart racing.*

He was telling me off, but I could tell he wasn't genuinely angry, which made me comfortable enough to fangirl over him a little. Lord Simeon could also tell that my sweet and innocent act was exactly that. After a sigh, he moved back very slightly, removed my glasses, then took my jaw in his hand somewhat forcefully.

"What a troublemaker you are. Will you really keep your mouth closed, or do I have to close it myself?"

He placed his lips on mine without waiting for an answer, pressing me against the wall and taking my breath away. Over and over, he kissed me so deeply that I was left panting roughly by the end. It was his punishment, his way of closing my mouth just as he had said. Afterwards, when I could hardly keep from collapsing, he brought his lips close to my ear. "I'll tell you everything once it's all resolved. At this juncture, the information is too sensitive. Nobody can know about it. I need you to rein in your curiosity and go home with Father and Mother. You understand, don't you?"



Even now that my lips were free, his hot breath left me unable to respond with more than a vague whimper. I tilted my head to dodge the ticklish sensation, but he only chuckled, giving me another hot sensation under my ear. *It's too much, I tell you! I'll collapse!*

"You didn't hear anything. That's clear, yes? You mustn't breathe a word to my parents either."

"Yes, understood!" I spluttered. "I promise, so please, stop!" Though I had long since surrendered to my husband's overwhelming intensity, I tried to push him back with hands drained of all their energy. Despite the embarrassment of doing so, I made a confession. "I won't be able to get to sleep on my own now. It's not fair."

Rather than pulling away, he embraced me even more strongly. "If you tell me that, I won't be able to sleep either. What an exasperating wife you are."

I let out a muffled moan as he kissed me deeply again. Then, at last, he set me free. He put my glasses back on my face, stroked my face with the back of his finger as a parting shot, then turned to go.

"Get an early night and wrap up warm. Oh, and even if the rain stops, don't even think about going to look at the rivers. If you don't listen to me, I'll have to lock you in your room."

Concluding with a typical Lord Simeon lecture, he returned to His Highness. Unable to bear it any longer, I sank to the floor, watching him leave with no idea what to do with the lingering heat of my inflamed passions.

I swear, I swear, I SWEAR! Where on earth did he learn that type of seduction technique?

It was a serious problem indeed. I decided I'd have to question him about it later—but I knew that I'd never win against him regardless.

Chapter Five

The rain had calmed down by the next morning, but so much damage had been done overnight that the town was in turmoil even before dawn. Lord Simeon had intended to set off again now that the weather had improved, and we were planning our return to Sans-Terre as well. However, Lord Lespinasse told us it was still too dangerous to leave.

“The Tanta has flooded, so it’s impossible to reach the bridge. There have also been landslides at various points in the mountains running alongside the main highway. We can’t be certain there won’t be more problems occurring later. Please, you have to stay here for now.”

“Could there be more landslides?” His Highness asked.

The lord nodded with a grave expression. “The rain only stopped at dawn, so it’s far too early to judge, but it’s entirely possible. Traveling right now is too dangerous.”

“Hmm.” Lord Simeon, who was standing beside the prince and peering down at a map, turned to his father. “Do landslides occur easily in this area?”

“Yes, the land is just right for it,” Earl Maximilian replied. “There’s a lot of granite, so it’s quite susceptible to heavy rainfall.”

In the corridor by the drawing room, servants were rushing back and forth. Townspeople had begun evacuating to the church, so Lady Lespinasse was arranging for supplies to be delivered. The young daughter-in-law was busy paying an undue amount of attention to us, but she was soon rounded up to help as well.

My father-in-law explained further, “Granite is an aggregate formed of several different minerals. Long years of weathering break it down into fragile sandy earth, making it easily disturbed by rain. The material that flows downward ultimately reaches the coast, forming sandy beaches. Based on that, I’m sure it’s clear that it’s an entirely ordinary geological feature and not inherently

dangerous. However, the Mauge region has so much granite content that there are quarries to extract it. There was a large-scale disaster as recently as thirty years ago, if I recall.”

Impressive! He’s really come to life!

The university professor was in his element. Even his wife, Countess Estelle, who often coldly described him as a “strange man obsessed with rocks,” was looking at him with the eyes of a young maiden.

Recognizing what excellent material this could be, I reached toward my pocket for my notebook, but then I thought better of it given the situation. *Besides, his explanation was a little complicated. Maybe I’ll ask him to explain it to me more slowly another time. I understand the key point, at least. This region is the perfect environment for landslides.*

“Yes, there was,” Lord Lespinasse replied. “Smaller-scale disasters happen frequently as well. This is more rain than we’ve seen in decades, so it’s vital to exercise great care or the consequences could be devastating.”

Hence, he explained, it was imperative that nobody go anywhere near the mountains right now. His Highness and Lord Simeon exchanged grim looks.

After the group split apart, the two of them went over to the window and had a quiet conversation. On the other side of the glass, soft light was shining at last.

“Beyond here are Angos and Chanmery, which are relatively flat. He should have been able to pass through them with no great difficulty, so there’s a chance he’s already made his way past the road through the mountains and come out on this side. We should search the local area first, if only to be certain we haven’t missed him.”

“Yes, indeed. We’re rather lacking in other options.”

So if not for the weather, they’d have followed the highway north. It sounds like the man they’re chasing came from that direction and is heading toward us. Now, what’s at the other end of the highway? Let me think. If you follow it all the way, it leads to the border with Linden. It also brings you close to the Ortan border; it’s possible to take a fork in the road and travel in the direction of Orta

instead.

Was Orta involved after all? I'd been told not to talk about it, so I held my tongue and feigned a lack of concern, but I couldn't help being intrigued.

Then, however, Countess Estelle said that we should go to the church to help, leaving me with no further time to think about it.

"If we can't go home, we should do what we can to help. Just because we're guests doesn't mean we can simply laze around. They can surely use every helping hand they can get."

Though she was typically a lady who lived in the world of hobbies and fashion, she urged me to join her with such gusto that she seemed a different person altogether. Moments like this made me sense keenly that she was Lord Simeon's mother. She was the mistress of a large house, after all; she was far more than just a lady of leisure. *I have a lot to learn from her.*

"Then perhaps I'll join as well," suggested her husband casually, having overheard this exchange.

"You'd only get in the way," his wife replied.

"You do realize, darling, that I regularly go walking across mountains and valleys when gathering materials for study. I'm more active than you are."

"I hope you don't think taking care of children and the elderly is the same as digging up rocks. Find some way to make your particular skills useful."

"You do realize my specialization is mineralogy, not geology, don't you?"

"What's the difference?"

"There's a huge difference."

I left them to their amiable quarrel and went to get changed. After puzzling over what to wear, I decided to put my mourning clothes back on. They were the easiest clothes to move around in out of everything I'd brought. It helped that they were black, so it wouldn't stand out if they got slightly dirty.

I reunited with Countess Estelle, who had dressed similarly, and we left the manor. The muddy ground was strewn with puddles and had a distinct lack of paving stones, so it wasn't an easy journey. The sky was also a gloomy shade

that made me fear the heavens might open again.

When we reached the church, there were more people than I'd expected. Those who had prepared in advance, expecting they would have to evacuate, were in a better state, but there were plenty more who had seemingly never thought the water would reach as far as their houses. They'd come with nothing but the clothes on their backs and were soaked through and shivering. People were asking around at the nearby houses and gathering blankets, but the church didn't have a fireplace, and the cold weather was unforgiving.

I went to the priest and asked if there was a heater that could be used at least.

"Yes, we have a wood-burning stove. Just the one, though. Franz, get the stove out of the storage shed, please."

The helper turned around. It was a young man. *Oh, is that the one from yesterday?*

He was about twenty years old, with light brown hair and blue eyes. His eyes looked sunken, which was only emphasized by his rather high forehead. Overall, his face had an unhealthy pallor; he looked worn down. His expression was morose as well. Instead of interacting with the large crowds of townspeople, he was keeping to himself.

Seeing his features up close, I had the feeling I'd seen them somewhere before. I racked my brain to try and recall. I didn't think I'd actually seen him, but he strongly resembled someone I had.

"Can you repeat?" Franz replied, expressing himself clumsily.

Oh, interesting. He appears to be foreign.

The priest repeated himself more slowly. "The stove. Get the stove, please. It's in the storage shed behind the church. Do you understand?"

"Stove?"

"Yes. Get the stove from the shed."

It looked as though he only understood about half of what the priest was saying. He stood stock still with a helpless expression.

I stepped forward and spoke to him in Lindenese. “Terribly sorry, but we’d like to ask for your help.”

Franz opened his eyes wide in astonishment. This wasn’t the same reaction he’d had when the priest spoke. Clearly he had understood this time. I’d guessed based on his name that he was from Linden, and it seemed I was correct.

“As you can see, everyone’s really cold,” I continued in Lindenese. “We’d like to bring them a heater so they can warm up a little. Apparently there’s a wood-burning stove in a shed behind the church, so would you mind coming with me to get it?”

He stared back in silence for a moment, a complicated mixture of emotions on his face. I stared back, wondering what the problem was. Then, still frowning, he nodded and started walking toward the back door. With a quick nod of goodbye to the priest, I followed him.

We exited into the rear garden that led to the graveyard. There I could see a small vegetable patch and a shed nearby. “Ah, that must be it.”

It was a simple wooden structure and wasn’t locked. We went inside to look for the stove.

Rakes, hoes, and other tools were hung neatly on a wall, but a lone shovel was lying in a corner of the floor. Wet soil still clung to it, so it had to have been used quite recently. Baskets of various sizes were piled up as well, and the stove was visible behind them. A heap of firewood sat beside it.

Leaving the stove itself to Franz, I decided to gather up some fuel. I borrowed a basket and filled it up, then picked it up, ready to go.

When I turned around, Franz was struggling.

“Shall we call for more help?”

The stove was made of iron, so it made sense that it was heavy. However, not only could he not lift it, he couldn’t even move it an inch. It looked as though physical labor had previously played no part in this man’s life.

I’d tried to speak with sympathy, conscious that he wouldn’t manage it, but

Franz took his hands off the heater with a look of ill humor.

“You should have asked someone else in the first place. Go and get someone right away.”

His reply was in fluent Lindenese. Indeed, it seemed he came from Linden.

“I can carry some fuel, but that’s all,” he continued. “Make someone else carry this.”

My word, he certainly has a forthright attitude.

“All right, then,” I said. “Take this basket, then fill another and take that too, please.”

He grunted in annoyance. “That’s far too much!”

Even my alternative suggestion was met with a complaint. I was left feeling rather put out. *If I can carry one, surely two won’t be a problem for him? Or is he no stronger than a woman?*

“If you won’t carry a decent amount of firewood either, why did you even come?”

“You told me to!”

“You understand the situation, don’t you? Everyone who can help needs to pitch in.”

As I replied, I took another look at Franz. Even though he was dressed in the same well-worn clothes of sturdy cloth as the local townspeople, he was clearly different underneath. I could tell he was of a status where he didn’t usually need to lower himself to performing a task like this. He wasn’t tanned at all either, and his slender fingers showed no sign of the roughness that came with manual work.

Is he Lindenese nobility? If so, what’s a man like that doing helping at a church? Whatever had led to this, it was sure to be complicated.

“Fair enough. Let’s carry one each, then.”

I put my basket down for a moment and filled another. He simply stood back and watched, not even helping with the basic task of putting some wood into a

basket. *This is what I'd expect of a nobleman, but it does mean he can't be a very good helper. It's difficult to even have a conversation with him, so the priest must have really had his hands full.*

Franz reluctantly picked up the filled basket, and we left the shed, at least able to carry some fuel for now.

Then I caught sight of a white royal guard's uniform on the road just beyond the church grounds. "Oh, excellent timing. Alain!"

When I called out to Lord Simeon's aide, he noticed and ran over with a friendly smile. "That looks quite heavy for you. I'll take it."

Before I'd even asked for any help, he reached out for the basket. *How nice to speak to someone kind and considerate again! Not like a certain someone next to me.*

"Thank you, but this isn't what we're having trouble with. Could you carry the stove instead? It's in that shed, but it's a bit too heavy for us."

Several other knights had followed behind Alain. Hearing what I said, they immediately went into the storage shed. Alain took the basket off my hands after all.

"I'm sorry, I don't mean to distract you while you're working."

"It's fine. We got orders from the top to help out here. From the very top." He used a euphemism to avoid revealing to the townspeople that the crown prince was visiting. "Half of us have been deployed."

"I see. Everyone will appreciate that, but doesn't it interfere with your duties?"

The knights rummaging around in the shed came straight back out. They hadn't joined forces to carry it; rather, a single one had put it on his shoulder and was bearing it with ease. *That's brute strength if I've ever seen it—or perhaps just the result of the Demon Vice Captain's brutal training.*

When I slipped a sideways glance at Franz, who had the arm strength of a fair maiden, he had turned away and was trying to hide his face behind the basket. Despite all his arrogance, it seemed he did have some masculine pride to be

wounded after all.

“The Vice Captain’s still holding the fort. Actually, we are focused on the mission to a certain extent as well. We’re conducting a search at the same time.”

We all proceeded back to the church. Franz rushed ahead, leaving us behind at such a pace that he almost appeared to be running away. *Honestly, he needn’t be so self-conscious. Nobody made fun of him.*

“Oh, really? I know I shouldn’t ask too much, but is there any way I can help?”

“I don’t think so. We’re just asking the locals for some information. We’re wondering if they’ve seen someone around here lately. An outsider.”

“Oh, I have no idea about that. Well, I suppose I’m an outsider myself.” I laughed realizing this.

Alain laughed cheerfully as well. “That reminds me, you’re skilled with languages, aren’t you? I don’t suppose you’ve heard anyone speaking Lindenese or Ortan?”

“Lindenese or...Ortan?”

I stopped in my tracks. Alain stopped beside me, an unconcerned look on his face. “Yes, although Lindenese is more likely, we believe. He might also speak Lagrangian, but if so, he’ll probably have an accent. Have you spotted anyone like that?”

“Just one person? Not part of a group?”

“That’s right. He should be a young man of about twenty.”

I looked around for Franz, but he had disappeared. While we were dawdling, he’d apparently gone into the church ahead of us.

Looking back, I supposed his behavior had been rather unnatural. I’d assumed he had rushed off because he was feeling indignant, but perhaps he really had been running away. Was it because the knights had arrived?

“Is everything all right?”

“Well, actually, I have seen a man who fits that description.”

The very second I said that, Alain and other knights drew nearer and surrounded me with looks of excitement. Completely encircled by the tall military officers, I felt as though I'd fallen down a hole.

"Really?! Where?"

Shrinking back slightly, I replied, "It was the person who was standing next to me moments ago. Franz, his name is."

All at once, the knights turned their heads to look in the direction Franz had gone.

"Franz?" said one.

"The name does have a Lindenese ring to it," added another.

"I did see him," said Alain, "but his face was hidden behind that basket, so I didn't get a good look. I assumed he was one of the locals."

"He's a helper at the church. I don't know many details, but his Lagrangian seemed quite limited. I spoke to him in Lindenese instead."

I wasn't sure whether to tell them that I'd gleaned he was likely a nobleman.

"Can you describe his appearance?"

"Let me see. He had light brown hair, his eyes were a rather deep shade of blue, and his forehead was noticeably—oh!"

When I cried out all of a sudden, Alain gasped in shock. There was no time to worry about him, though. I had to cling onto the memory that had flashed in my mind.

I remembered now. That distinctive forehead and other features that I was sure resembled someone I'd seen—they looked exactly like those of the queen of Linden! I'd seen her when she made an official visit to Lagrange last year. There was no doubt about it.

Slowly, I said, "Could it be that Franz is a member of the Lindenese royal fa—"

"Shh!"

Hushed sharply by Alain, I hurriedly covered my mouth and looked around to be sure that no one was listening. Some people were standing on the road

nearby having a chat, but to my relief, they directed no more than a glance our way before walking on.

Alain quickly gave orders to the knights.

“Mirbeau, take the stove and come with me into the church. The rest of you, surround the building and keep watch.”

“Yes, sir!”

Turning to me, he asked, “Will you help us look for this Franz fellow?”

I readily agreed. After all, I was the only one who knew his face. We separated from the knights who were to form a perimeter and quickly went back inside.

Far more people were sheltering there than before. Wending through them, I tried to look for Franz. I quickly found the basket of wood he’d carried inside, but the man himself was nowhere to be seen.

“Excuse me,” I said to the man next to the basket. “The man who brought this in here—did you see where he went?”

The knight carrying the stove lowered it into the floor, and the evacuees who were in desperate need of it rushed over.

“No idea, I’m afraid.” With an exhausted face, the man started putting wood into the stove.

I looked around at the others nearby. “Does anyone know a man named Franz?”

However, all I got back from most of them were puzzled looks.

“The one who carried the basket in?” said an elderly lady standing next to a woman with a baby. “I remember he was a young man.”

“Yes, that’s him. He helps out at the church.”

“Hmm? You must be mistaken. The only helpers here are a married couple, the Ogiers.”

With a bony finger, she pointed to a man and woman close to her own age.

“Are you certain there’s no one else? There should be a young man too.”

“Not as far as I know. Have you ever heard of him?”

The woman beside her shook her head. With a soft, weary voice, she was desperately trying to soothe her agitated baby. “You couldn’t bring us any hot soup or anything, could you? My baby is freezing.”

“Oh,” I replied hesitantly. “Wait a moment, I’ll see.”

Is the fire still not lit yet? Looking down, the men crouching in front of the stove seemed to be having some difficulty.

“The fuel’s damp. It’s also not enough on its own—we need some brushwood for kindling.”

“The brushwood’s probably damp as well. Can’t we use paper instead?”

“Hey! The rest of us are waiting to use the stove as well!”

“Stop keeping it to yourself!”

“There’s only one, so we need to prioritize the old and the young. Healthy adults need to make way!”

An argument was breaking out among the evacuees. The cold, fatigue, and worry had sapped their patience. Alain and Mirbeau stepped in to try and calm them down.

I ran back over to Countess Estelle, who was arranging for food to be distributed.

“There are a lot of babies and small children. Will we have hot soup for them?”

“Soon, yes. The larger problem is that we don’t have enough bowls and spoons. If we can’t find more, they’ll have to take turns, and that will only lead to further discord.” She knitted her brows, looking over at the arguing townspeople.

Just then, the priest came over. “We can ask the people living close to the church to provide some. Everyone tends to have plenty so they can provide for town assemblies and such, so it shouldn’t take long to find enough.”

“Father, I’ve wanted to talk to you. Do you know where Franz went?”

The priest raised his eyebrows and looked around the room. "I'm afraid I haven't seen him since I asked him to get the stove."

"He's definitely come back in here since then."

I waved at Alain and Mirbeau, signaling them to join us. The priest was surprised to see military uniforms, especially those of the royal guards.

"This man called Franz. How long has he been here? What events led to him being in your employ?"

Alain's questions apparently made the priest nervous and reluctant to say anything. It wasn't that he didn't understand the situation, but that he was wary of what might happen if he said too much.

Recognizing this as well, Alain added, "Please don't be alarmed. We're not trying to capture him. If Franz is indeed the man we're looking for, we mean to protect him."

"Protect him?"

"Yes. I can't share any details, but if we don't find him urgently and put him under our protection, he's likely to be in serious danger."

The priest fell silent; the word "danger" had no doubt made an impact, as it had on me.

When he received no response, Alain continued, "Please, will you tell us? When did he arrive at the church?"

Although the priest avoided Alain's gaze and pondered for a moment, he then began to talk without being prompted again. "Three nights ago, I found him passed out in the rear garden, covered in mud. He was suffering from nothing more than hunger and exhaustion, so he soon recovered, but he didn't tell me a thing about what had happened to him. All he told me was his name, but that was probably an alias anyway. It was clear that his hesitancy wasn't only due to the language barrier. He was hiding something, I'm sure of it."

"Lieutenant, it must be him!" Mirbeau interjected in an excited tone. "We should chase after him right away!"

Alain remained levelheaded and resisted this urge. "We mustn't lose our

heads. Tellier and the others are outside, so he can't have gone far. Father, did you really leave it at that when you had clear suspicions? Did you not think he might be a criminal?"

"I won't say I had absolute confidence, but I didn't have the feeling he'd run away after committing some evil deed. He was scared, that was all. I told him that if he needed help we should inform the local government, but he was adamant that I not tell anyone. Honestly, I had the impression he'd run off if I asked too many questions, so I decided to give him time."

"I see," said Alain, nodding and not pressing further for now. "Can you show us where he's been staying?"

"Very well. Come with me."

Led by the priest, we left the main part of the church and went to the living quarters. There was no sign of Franz in the bedroom he'd been using. The priest, Alain, and I entered, leaving Mirbeau in the corridor; the room was small enough that we filled it almost completely. Nothing was there except a modest bed and a single wooden chest. Other than the blanket being slightly disarrayed, there was nothing to suggest the room had even been used.

"No, he had no effects with him to begin with. Mathilde laundered his clothes. They should be in the chest, I believe." The priest pointed.

Alain opened the chest and pulled out a set of high-quality gentleman's clothing. The shirt was made of silk, and the jacket had embroidery on the outside and a silk satin lining. In the sleeves, cufflinks with quartz stones carved into a decorative form sparkled subtly.

For the average nobleman, this would be excessive. It could be just right for a royal, however. If he was dressed like this, it's no surprise that the priest didn't think he was a criminal.

"He didn't retrieve these," said Alain, "which means he might simply be busy with some errand. Or else he did run away, and in a great hurry."

"You're searching for him to protect him, aren't you?" I asked. "If it's dangerous for him to be left alone, why would he run off?"

Now that I was certain Franz was royalty, the idea of him lacking any guards

was disconcerting. That he was specifically in danger made it worse. “Who can say?” said Alain, sighing as he returned the clothes to the chest. “That’s exactly what we’d like to know. Why is he running? It’s caused us a great deal of trouble, quite honestly. Anyway, most pressingly we need to find out if Franz is indeed our missing man. I’m sorry for the trouble, but we’d like to look in the other rooms too.”

After saying this to the priest, Alain left the room. He and Mirbeau split up and began opening doors.

“Any luck?” said Alain as they finished their cursory check of all the rooms.

“No sign of him. He must be outside after all, I suppose.”

“Tellier and the others should have caught him. They’d have noticed anything suspicious. We haven’t heard them whistle for us.”

“There are a lot of townspeople going in and out. Maybe he slipped in amongst those.”

“Hmm, that is possible.”

They made their way outside. Curious, I followed them.

What on earth could be going on? A Lindenese royal is on the run, and His Highness and Lord Simeon have come here to protect him? At the same time, he seems to be running from them. It seems almost as if he’s run away from home. Is he avoiding them because he doesn’t want them to find him and bring him back?

I frowned and pondered this. Was that really a plausible scenario? Royals were people like anyone else, so the idea of him sneaking away wasn’t outside the realm of reason, but why would Prince Severin have been sent to help? Surely Linden had its own royal guards who could handle the search?

To my knowledge, the king of Linden also didn’t have a son in Franz’s age range. That meant he wasn’t a direct descendent, in which case there was even less reason for His Highness to spring into action. There had to be something very specific about the danger Alain had mentioned.

Alain regrouped with the royal guards outside and ordered a search of the

vicinity. If Franz had escaped the church, I was concerned about where he might have gone. With floods and a chance of more landslides, he was at risk wherever he went—and if he headed toward the highway, he might be facing a different kind of danger altogether.

Then, just as the knights were about to spring into action, a man ran over, desperation on his face.

“Soldiers! Please! We need your help!”

He appeared to be one of the townspeople. Pleading, he clung to Alain’s uniform.

“My wife and child are going to be swept away by the river! We were trying to evacuate when the bridge gave out, and now they’re just barely hanging on to the debris! You have to help them!”

Given the time-sensitive nature of their own task, the knights weren’t sure how to respond.

“I’m...I’m so sorry, but we can’t spare the manpower right now,” Alain replied. “Is there no one else you can ask?”

“I’m begging you! If you don’t act now, my wife and child will die! Save them, please!”

Alain was left torn. He couldn’t abandon his mission, but he couldn’t coldly turn the man away either. Not when lives were hanging in the balance.

At last he told the others, “All of you, follow this man and launch a rescue effort. I’ll continue the search.”

“Alone?” came the reply from Mirbeau.

“The rescue needs manpower more than the search does. Maybe you can throw a rope across to the other bank, or drop one down into the river and climb. One of you should go and get the Vice Captain as well.” Then he turned to me. “Marielle, I’m sorry, but would you mind helping me with the search? You know what the target’s face looks like.”

I agreed without question, of course. “Yes, certainly I’ll help.”

“Thank you so much.” He turned back to his men. “Go! And don’t make things

worse by panicking!”

“Yes, sir! Now, where is this river? Show us the way, quickly!”

“This way!” the man replied and ran off, leading the charge with the knights following. From behind me and Alain, some locals who had overheard this exchange stepped forward and talked among themselves.

“A bridge got washed away? Which one? The one just by the highway?”

“That one’s still intact, surely. It’s made of stone, so it won’t fail because of a little water. It must be the one over the irrigation canal. It’s already overflowed onto the fields.”

“Who was that, anyway? How could he only be evacuating at this late stage?”

“Who knows? I’ve never seen him before.”

Others followed after the knights, presumably meaning to help with the rescue. Alain turned away and cast his eyes across the neighborhood surrounding the church. “I’ll go this way, and you go that way,” he told me. “Oh, and if you find him, use this to let me know.”

He removed a strap from his uniform. This was not purely decorative; a small whistle hung from it. It wasn’t typically used in their usual work guarding the palace, but in an emergency they could blow it to call for support.

I took the whistle and put it around my neck, ready to use at a moment’s notice.

“Should we ask anyone to help?” I suggested. “The priest, for example?”

“No, everyone inside has got enough on their plates. Honestly, did that man *have* to make our lives so difficult when there’s so much else to worry about?”

Alain’s usual cheery demeanor was nowhere to be seen. He ran off with a look of annoyance.

I set off to search in the opposite direction, making my way along the waterlogged streets at a light jog. As hard as I tried to avoid it, mud splattered onto the hem of my dress. My shoes were filthy as well. Although this was technically a town, we were still in the countryside, with quite some distance between one house and the next. I saw a great many small fields where

households grew their own vegetables and sheds that were likely filled with agricultural equipment.

I came across a street wedged between a tall fence and a hillside. A chestnut grove stood at the top of the slope, with burrs rolling down onto the street. It was narrower than the surrounding paths too, with a tight corner a short distance along. *If someone was trying to make their escape, maybe this street would seem like an inviting option. Rather than trying to run too far, they'd find somewhere like this with poor visibility and hide.*

When I stepped onto this street, I suddenly heard a yell.

It had come from the direction I was heading toward. I froze in shock for a moment, then soon started running again, hurrying to the blind corner. *That was a man's voice. Was it Franz? It definitely sounded like him.*

"Franz?" I shouted as I turned the corner. The fence, which surrounded the rear of a house, came to an end. Beyond it was an empty lot, with the rural landscape extending into the distance. My path was blocked by figures spread across the street.

There were four men—no, five. One of them was Franz. *So it really was him.* His arms were being held by a man on each side. For a moment I thought one of the townspeople might have done us a favor and found him first, but I quickly realized that wasn't a realistic possibility.

Why would the locals grab him? Alain didn't ask any of them for help. None of them should even know about the situation. When I asked, none of them even knew who Franz was. What's going on? This couldn't be some unrelated disagreement...could it?

The men noticed my arrival and turned to look. Their clothes were identical to those of the townspeople, making them seem entirely at home in the environment, but something was off. The residents of this idyllic town were currently suffering at the hands of a natural disaster. All of them were in an agitated and nervous state. These men, on the other hand, looked at me with calm, impassive expressions that were quite unlike any others I'd seen that day. Even though I still had no idea who they were or what was happening, a chill ran down my spine.

One of them, a rather slender man, stood apart from the others. His long limbs gave him a lanky appearance. From behind, he looked thoroughly normal, but the instant I saw him, my heart lurched.

He slowly turned around. His face, that of a man in his early thirties, looked back at me in an ostensibly congenial manner. His silvery gray hair wavered in the wind, revealing a view of the earring in his left ear. The black stone—his charm made of onyx—was just where it had been before.

His narrow eyes narrowed even further, reminding me of a cat in high spirits. He smiled as if licking his lips, ready to stalk the prey he'd spotted.

"What a fortuitous coincidence," he said. "I'm so glad to see you again."

He spoke in fluent Lagrangian, with pronunciation so perfect that I couldn't detect a foreign accent no matter how carefully I listened. He could easily pass as one of my fellow countrymen.

And yet.

"How long has it been, Mrs. Flaubert? You appear to be well."

I knew this man who was greeting me in such a friendly and familiar manner. I knew he wasn't Lagrangian.

"Mr. Mereaux," I replied softly, my voice trembling. The name found my lips on its own.

How? How can he be here? I gasped for breath. My quivering hands clutched at the bodice of my dress.

Memories appeared in my mind of a dazzling summer sun. I recalled a beautiful rainbow island and a pirate ship; a secret cave hidden behind a waterfall; gunfire, and a bloodsoaked hand reaching toward me.

His silvery gray hair had disappeared beneath the waves, vanishing without a trace.

The man before me put a hand on his chest and bowed politely, wearing an entirely composed expression as if nothing at all was out of the ordinary. One would almost think the friendly acquaintanceship between us was still intact. He was standing right in front of me, with no sign that anything had changed

about him. He had survived unscathed after all, only making us *think* he'd drowned while secretly making his escape.

This was the Ortan operative who had formerly gone by the name of Hector Mereaux. Lord Simeon had told me he was known as the “Silver Fox.” He was a terrifying man who thought nothing of murder, who committed unspeakable acts with a warm, cordial smile on his face. Now he had appeared before me again and had Franz in his clutches.

I see now. The “serious danger” the knights had to save Franz from—it was this man. He’s been hunting for Franz!

Chapter Six

I had countless unanswered questions. What exactly was going on? Who was Franz, and why was an Ortan operative targeting him? However, I had no time to worry about any of that. First I lifted up the whistle, which I'd grabbed along with my dress, and brought it to my lips.

I took a deep breath, then blew as hard as I could. A shrill sound rang out across the charcoal sky, suitably loud for an emergency signal. In fact, I was left staggered that something small enough to hold in my fingers could make such a deafening noise. I breathed in and blew the whistle a second time, then a third.

He had to know I was summoning aid. I'd expected to be grabbed and stopped immediately. Another of the men, who was currently empty-handed, did start moving toward me, but Mr. Mereaux—the Silver Fox, rather—waved a hand to stop him.

For reasons I could not discern, the Silver Fox ignored me and continued his sociable chatter. He appeared entirely at ease, showing no sign that he intended to retreat, either.

"It's been four months, hasn't it? I was so hoping I'd see you again one day. As before, you have a loveliness about you that makes me surprised to realize you're a married woman. I've heard whispers that you were wounded, but you appear to be all better by now. I was quite concerned for you, I must say. How heartrending for the beautiful, dainty arm of a noblewoman to spill its blood. I do wish I could have seen it, though. The sight of you lying there, a red stream spilling from your wound... Just imagining it makes me excited."

His demeanor was strange, but his words were stranger still. A disconcertingly mesmerized expression appeared on his face, as though he really was imagining the scene.

"You said you hated blood," I murmured, my throat dry. "The mess, and the smell."

“Oho! How kind of you to remember.” The comment I couldn’t keep from uttering had put an even broader smile on his face. He spread his arms in a theatrical gesture. “Indeed, I hate the ugliness of a corpse spattered with blood. Nonetheless, I’d enjoy seeing you in such a state. Though I’m sure your husband treats you tenderly every night, you’re far too cute. You never show the slightest hint of seductive allure. With blood spilling from you, I’ve no doubt you would exude a truly perverse charm.”

What is he saying? It doesn’t make sense. He acted this way before, too. If anything, he’s become even more incomprehensible. What I knew was that I felt deeply uncomfortable. I shuddered. *He’s speaking ill of me...I think. He’s comparing me to a child, calling me cutesy rather than alluring.*

Was he resentful toward me for being the reason he’d failed in his mission, and thus gloating over the knowledge that I’d been hurt? If so, it didn’t seem at all reasonable. The mission itself had involved infiltrating Lagrange to steal information and weapons technology, and had extended as far as murder. I had far more right to be angry at him than the reverse. He had killed a close relative of Lord Simeon’s who had learned about his double life. He’d also sown the seeds of suspicion against House Flaubert. By any reckoning, he was the one at fault.

Deciding that I wouldn’t let myself be defeated, I steeled my courage. I had to somehow play for time until the knights arrived. As I waited in the hope of hearing footsteps rushing closer, I said whatever I could think of.

“Did you and your men come here for Franz? What do you mean to do with him?”

“Franz?” replied the Silver Fox, arching his eyebrows. He turned his head to look behind him. “Is that what you called yourself?” he said in Lindenese. “Heh. How pathetic. To think that the survivor of a royal family that once claimed such influence would run off and hide under a false name like a dirty criminal.”

Franz was visibly riled up by these scornful words. Though he was still being held firmly in place by the Silver Fox’s fellow operatives, he shot back verbally. “You’re the criminals, you wretched usurpers! You used schemes and acts of violence to steal my father’s throne, and now you’re ruling the kingdom with no

right whatsoever!”

“I hate to disagree with you, but there were plenty of reasons that the king deserved to be deposed. That’s why the revolution was a success—we were able to find a great many who shared in our cause. There’s no more to it than that.” The Silver Fox turned his whole body to face Franz now. “You talk of the right to rule, but what exactly bestows that right? Why, I believe it’s the crown you were clutching as you ran away. I can’t seem to see it, however. Where have you put it?”

Franz remained silent.

“We saw you escape with it during the raid. Where is it hidden? Is it in that church? Unless you’re prepared to be honest, innocent people will have to suffer. I’d rather avoid all that. It would be far preferable for you to tell me.”

Turmoil creased Franz’s face; he looked away from the Silver Fox. Finally he said, “I threw that thing into the river while I was escaping. I’ve wanted to get rid of it for years, but I had to make sure it didn’t fall into your hands. That’s why I made sure to dispose of it where no one would ever find it.”

He had a crown, but he threw it away? Though I was quite shocked, the Silver Fox merely snorted. “You’re a bad liar. Dear oh dear, I suppose I have no choice but to question the priest after all.”

Franz grunted in shock. Apparently, it had indeed been a lie; his face blanched in an instant. *Was he trying to avoid putting the priest and anyone else at the church in danger after all the aid he’d been given? Perhaps he’s a kind and thoughtful person at his core.*

I watched, increasingly nervous that Alain still hadn’t arrived. Just as I was considering blowing the whistle again, the voice I’d been waiting for finally called out. “I’ve found you!”

“Alain!”

Relieved, I turned to look behind me. The familiar royal guard uniform appeared from behind the tight corner—but the second I saw him, I was grabbed from behind. I shrieked and Alain let out a gasp.

The Silver Fox’s slender yet strong arm restrained me. Laughing, he said,

“How nice of you to turn up at last, honorable knight. A tad late, though, I’m afraid.”

“Are you the Ortans?!”

Alain appeared to have grasped the situation at a glance. He reached for his saber.

“Temper, temper,” said the Silver Fox. “I’d rather avoid that if possible. I have no desire to engage in combat with you. We’ll be gone soon, so you needn’t worry.”

The henchman who had stepped forward before did so again, and this time the Silver Fox didn’t stop him. As Alain readied himself for a sword fight, the man aimed a gun at him, freezing him in his tracks.

“Even an elite officer is at a disadvantage when he’s so outnumbered, wouldn’t you say? Don’t throw your life away.”

Alain grimaced.

“Oh, and your comrades won’t be back for some time, so don’t expect any backup.”

Clutching me with suffocating force, the Silver Fox laughed derisively. Understanding and indignation rose on Alain’s face. The truth simultaneously dawned on me.

The man who had come begging for help had been one of them. It had all been a ruse to distract the knights and make sure they were out of reach. Undoubtedly, they were still being kept preoccupied so they didn’t come back. There was no sign of any other knights following after Alain. We had long since fallen into his trap.

I gritted my teeth in vexation. If our enemies had been civilians or minor threats, the difference in numbers would hardly have mattered at all, but they were trained operatives. Just as the Silver Fox had said, Alain stood no chance on his own.

The boughs of the chestnut trees swayed in the wind. More burrs rolled down the hillside, the thorny coverings falling to the ground, empty of their contents.

“Could I ask you to pass a message on to your beloved superior officer? Tell him to look for the Holy Crown of Lorencio. It’s likely to be in the church or somewhere thereabouts. If he finds it, I’ll return his wife. Thank you for your assistance.”

Alain remained quiet. His eyes flickered restlessly back and forth between me and Franz. His frustration was palpable. My mind raced as well. There had to be some way to distract their attention.

The burrs continued to fall. Alain glanced upward for a moment. The Silver Fox moved, indicating that the standoff had ended. Against my will, he pulled me along with him.

“Dammit,” Alain grunted. “I hope you come and retrieve my remains, Vice Captain!”

In desperation, he kicked the ground. Then he charged toward the man aiming the gun at him. In the same instant that the latter was about to press the trigger, his hand was directly struck by spiky burrs.

The operative yelped in pain and reflexively rubbed his hand. Alain used the opening to slash with his saber. The man barely dodged the strike, dropping the gun in the process.

I heard a tut directly above my head, and at the very same moment, I was pushed away. Losing my footing, I tumbled forwards, colliding with something—someone—who caught me to break my fall.

As I wondered what was going on, a sharp sound cut through the air. The Silver Fox took another large leap back to avoid the blade. All of his earlier confidence was gone now. “How can you have returned already?” he muttered in annoyance. “Was this a trap?!”

I clung to the man who was holding me. In his warm arms, I felt so safe, so reassured, that I could have cried.

Lord Simeon barked an order. “Don’t let them escape!”

As the operatives started to run, taking Franz with them, knights leapt down the slope and began their onslaught.

I thought the tide would turn immediately, but the enemy wasn't about to be defeated that easily. Several shots rang out, and the Silver Fox picked up the gun that had dropped to the ground. Lord Simeon leapt to the side, covering me with his body.

Ferocity, frantic footsteps, and gunshots all blended together. I lost all sense of what was happening around me. I could hardly even look, I was so frightened. Though I wanted to get myself out of the way to avoid encumbering Lord Simeon, I was too paralyzed to move, and he showed no sign of releasing me from his strong embrace.

It was all over in a flash, but it felt like an eternity. When the noise finally died down, I raised my head slowly, with trepidation. The Silver Fox and his fellow operatives were nowhere to be seen. It appeared they had escaped, but the knights hadn't sustained any serious wounds at least, and for that I was eternally grateful.

"Marielle, are you all right?"

Lord Simeon's voice took on a peaceful tone, assuring me that the danger had passed. I looked at the face peering down at me. The tears that had welled in my eyes spilled over.

"Lord Simeon, you're here," I whimpered.

"Are you hurt?"

"Not at all. I'm fine."

His large hand gently stroked my face and my back. Even though there was nothing to be afraid of anymore, I suddenly couldn't keep the tears from flowing.

Alain came over to us, looking weary. After exhaling heavily, he said, "I honestly thought I might die. You're so cruel, Vice Captain. If you were laying a trap for them, you could have told me."

"There was no such plan. We simply turned back halfway when the situation changed, that's all."

As he replied to his subordinate, Lord Simeon subtly loosened his grip. I

noded to indicate that I could stand on my own. I let go of him as well.

He turned to face Alain, who suddenly let out a cry of shock.

“Vice Captain! Have you been shot?!”

“What?” I gasped. When I looked at his body, I saw a hole in his uniform just below his right shoulder, and the white fabric was stained crimson. “Oh no! Lord Simeon!”



“It only grazed me. It wasn’t a direct hit, so there’s no need to worry.”

“But...you’re bleeding so heavily. You need urgent treatment.”

I reached out my hand, intending to stop the flow of blood. However, I couldn’t bring myself to touch it, fearing that pressing against the wound would hurt him. I froze, unsure of how to act.

“We have to get you back to the manor and call a doctor. No, we should go straight to the doctor’s house.”

“Marielle, please calm down.” He caressed my still-wet cheek, wiping off the tears. “It’s not serious enough to justify so much fuss. It only looks worse because my uniform is white.”

“But...”

“I’m more concerned about Prince Gracius,” he interrupted, turning to his men. “How is he?”

Admittedly, I’m worried about Franz too. Wait, so he’s really called Prince Gracius? In any case, I hope he’s all right.

A knight who was kneeling on the ground turned his head and called Lord Simeon over. “Come and look, Vice Captain.”

Beside him, a figure lay collapsed on the floor. *Franz wasn’t shot, was he?!*

Lord Simeon sped over to him. I followed in a feverish haste and looked at him, a cold sweat running over me. Thankfully, he wasn’t bleeding. He was unconscious, but I couldn’t see any injuries.

“It looks like he hit his head when he fell.”

“Don’t shake him,” said Lord Simeon. “Slowly turn him face-up and ensure his airway is open.”

“Yes, sir.”

The knights briskly set about following his instructions. Lord Simeon himself kneeled beside him and checked his pulse and breathing.

Alain came up beside him. “Vice Captain, take off your jacket, please.” He helped him remove it and roll up his sleeve, then applied first aid.

After a few moments, I decided I couldn't simply stand and stare. "I'll call a doctor." Mentally scolding my trembling legs, I started back toward the main road.

"Lieutenant Lisnard, go with her."

"Yes, sir."

On Lord Simeon's orders, Alain chased after me. We returned to the church in a hurry, explained the situation to the priest, and asked him to summon the doctor. While we were waiting, the knights arrived carrying Franz. There would be no way for him to rest properly in the main area, so they took him to the residential quarters.

The other knights, who had been led astray by the false plea for help, returned as well. A bridge really had collapsed, but there had been no sign of any people waiting for rescue in the river. While they were searching, the man who'd led them there vanished as well, so they had ultimately realized it was all a ruse. They'd returned as quickly as they could, and were now gathered in front of their superior officer looking incredibly sheepish.

A messenger had been sent to the Lespinasse manor in a hurry as well, and even His Highness had come rushing to the church. Now the usually quiet rural church was in even more of an uproar.

The cramped bedroom couldn't fit too large a crowd, so I stepped outside without being asked. Worried though I was, I couldn't exactly do anything to help. Instead, I returned to helping the evacuees. Being busy was a good way to occupy my fretful mind.

Fortunately, there were no townspeople who hadn't managed to escape in time. The rain had stopped as well. Looking up at the altar, I said a silent prayer for this to be the end of it.

There was far more to do than I expected, and I soon found myself exhausted. When I reached my limit and sank into a chair, someone stood before me and presented a mug of soup. It smelled divine. It was the same food being served to the evacuees. I accepted it with gratitude.

"Thank you very much."

“You deserve it. I know you’re always full of spirit, but even you must be worn out after all that hard work.”

“Hmm?”

I looked up, surprised by the man’s familiar manner. I’d assumed it was probably one of the royal guards, but it was actually one of the townspeople.

Or so I thought for a split second. When I realized the truth, my mouth fell open.

“It’s been quite some time, hasn’t it? You look incredibly fetching even in a mourning dress. Marielle the young widow... Now that is an intriguing prospect!”

His eyes, as blue as the ocean, held a jovial gleam, and his short black hair flicked upwards at the ends in a rather carefree fashion. I was about to react loudly, but he put a finger to his lips and shushed me.

More quietly, I said, “You? But...what are you doing here?”

“I’m here to see you, of course, my beloved. I never intended to give up simply because you’re married, and if you’re a young widow, that’s all the more reason.”

“Unfortunately for you, I’m not! Lord Simeon is alive and well.”

I tried to brush him away with a hand gesture, but this had the opposite effect; he took hold of my hand and kissed my fingertips.

“Stop that! Let me go!”

“How cold of you. Surely there’s nothing wrong with a friendly hello.”

“If I give you an inch, you’ll take a mile. Don’t think I’m not aware of that.”

“You can’t expect me to abandon my beloved when she’s sitting here sad and lonely.”

“I’m neither sad nor lonely. I’m resting because I’m tired.”

Even when I glared at him, he took it with a smile and drew even closer, a bold expression forming on his handsome features.

“I’ve told you that Lavian men are full of passion. We don’t give up on a

romantic entanglement because of a simple rejection.”

“It’s an outright refusal, and I’m sure you know it. I wish you’d act accordingly.”

“Oh, I’d rather not.”

He moved to wrap an arm around me. The distance between us was about to become genuinely intimate, not merely jokingly so. Fearing that the soup would spill everywhere, I clutched the mug more tightly.

At that moment, firm hands took hold of his head from behind. “I turn my head for one moment and you swoop in. What else should I expect from a common criminal?”

“Vice Captain... Your grip strength is abnormal. Are you more gorilla than man?”

“Perhaps I should keep squeezing and crack your skull open.”

“Eek! That sounds far too believable coming from your lips! All right, you’ve terrified me into submission! Look, I’ve stopped!”

With the pressure increasing to dangerous levels, the black-haired man finally relented and took his hands off me, raising them both to indicate his surrender. Lord Simeon let go as well; the two of them stood up straight and faced one another.

Lord Simeon stared frigidly. “You can’t behave appropriately even in an emergency, can you?”

Not to be cowed, the other man snidely replied, “That’s awfully high and mighty considering you were far away from the town by the time I warned you to come back. Did you honestly not sense the danger, Vice Captain?”

“Ah yes, I haven’t thanked you properly for that. In that case, how about I send you to meet your maker in a quick and painless manner, to truly show my gratitude?”

“Unfortunately, God and I aren’t on the best terms. I fear he’ll turn me away at the gates.”

“True, it is only fitting for a villain to go to hell. I’m sure you’ll be welcomed

there with open arms.”

“You hardly belong in heaven either. You dream of looking down on everyone from on high, but you’ll find yourself sinking into the depths.”

Those nearby started noticing the two men quarreling. There was something quite conspicuous about Lord Simeon, who had put his hand on his saber and was exuding a murderous aura, and the man continuing to talk back to him as if entirely unconcerned.

Vexed by this senseless argument, I pounded as hard as I could against the seat of my chair. “That’s enough! The townspeople are weary and suffering. Don’t fight in front of them!”

They both looked at me. Then, after a pause, they looked away, embarrassed. Once I was sure that Lord Simeon’s vicious rage had dissipated, I put my hand on my hip and glared at them. “I’ve had enough. You’re going to tell me what’s going on.”

“Marielle, it’s—”

“Don’t tell me it’s confidential and I mustn’t ask. It’s been one thing after another, and I’ve been caught right in the middle without even understanding it. Now even the thief has turned up!”

When I pointed my finger with a snap, murmurings broke out amongst the locals behind us.

“A thief? Who’s a thief?”

“The one in the white uniform is military, so is it the black-haired fellow?”

“He’s handsome for a thief!”

“It looked more like a lover’s quarrel to me.”

“So it’s a love triangle?”

“I can’t believe that. You’d expect the woman at the center of it to be prettier.”

These comments almost made me lose heart, but I fought to hold strong and maintain my stern expression. “I won’t put up with it any longer. Explain

everything, in full detail. I won't back down until you tell me!"

Lord Simeon silently looked away, an uncomfortable expression on his face.

We were interrupted by a firm knocking sound. "That's enough! This is not the place."

While we'd been distracted, His Highness had arrived, accompanied by an escort. When he'd knocked on the chair, we had all turned to look and were met by a reproachful expression. The blood drained from my head and I drew back slightly.

His Highness took a breath and looked at the three of us.

"I'll grant that it would be unreasonable to demand you be quiet when you've become so heavily involved. We'll explain it all, just not here. You shall come with us as well, Earl Cialdini."

Careful to avoid revealing too much to anyone listening, His Highness called the man by the name he used in polite society. However, to me, Earl Cialdini was better known as Lutin, the renowned thief.

Lutin shrugged and obeyed.

Chapter Seven

I'd first met Lutin the previous autumn. He was a master of disguise who could appear in the most unexpected places, contriving elaborate schemes to steal treasures from nobles and wealthy businessmen. The name of Lutin the mysterious thief was famous not only in Lagrange, but across the neighboring countries as well.

Though he dedicated himself to his professional thievery with plenty of enthusiasm, this was a cover for his more secretive work. In fact, he was a spy for the Grand Duchy of Lavia, a country to the west. Earl Emidio Cialdini was apparently not the only name he went by. Based on what he'd told me, it was no more than a name that existed on documents, one of many, to allow him to inhabit the role when he needed to. Due to this, I had continued to call him Lutin.

Now that I recall, when we last parted, I told him he had to tell me his real name if we ever met again.

This had occurred in the spring, in the highly chaotic lead-up to my wedding. Looking back, there had been a touch of unease between the two of us, but he'd cast all that aside with that jovial reunion, and there was no longer any room for awkwardness. Had that been his aim in behaving so forwardly? It was hard to tell given how much of a joker he was at the best of times.

In any case, there was no time to ask about his name. All we could do was follow.

We borrowed a room in the residential quarters to talk, with knights keeping watch to ensure no one eavesdropped. Four of us entered: myself, Lord Simeon, His Highness, and Lutin.

The room appeared to be a combined living and dining room, with a table that could seat four. After some discord about the seating arrangements, I sat down next to His Highness. Both of the other men had wished to sit beside me, but ultimately I sat facing my husband instead. He and Lutin made an uneasy,

snarling pair on the opposite side of the table.

“How is Franz’s condition?” I asked.

“He hasn’t awoken yet, but he’s stable,” His Highness replied. “Apparently he’s likely to have suffered a concussion, so he’ll need careful attention even after he regains consciousness.”

“And you, Lord Simeon?”

I turned my attention to my husband, who tapped his shoulder with his opposite hand and smiled. By now he had put his jacket back on. “I’ve been suitably patched up. As I said, it was nothing overly serious.”

His uniform was still torn and stained red with blood where the bullet had grazed it. Remembering the reason behind it made my shoulders sag. “Still, you were hurt protecting me. I’m sorry.” Despite my attitude a few minutes earlier, I wasn’t really in a position to be angrily making demands.

“I’m sure you don’t need to blame yourself,” said Lutin reassuringly. “You were in the wrong place at the wrong time. The Silver Fox wanted to kill the Vice Captain, so the result would have been the same whether you were there or not.”

It was difficult for me to concede this point, but Lord Simeon readily agreed with him. “It was my fault for allowing such a situation to occur. I’m only glad you were unharmed.”

“To conclude,” said His Highness, “we’re all relieved that no one sustained any grievous injuries.”

Realizing that he was correct, I decided this was no time to lose my head and sat up straight. “I thought Franz was Lindenese royalty, but it seems that’s not quite right. I heard the name Prince Gracius mentioned.”

“Yes, that’s right. His officially designated name is Lucio Saucedo Enriquez de Gracius—even if that name holds no real meaning as of now.”

“The crown prince of Orta,” I replied.

The name “Prince Gracius” had come up in the course of studying the Ortan language. The heir to the Ortan throne, the crown prince in other words, was

always known as Prince Gracius. However, “Gracius” was not a surname, but a title granted to the crown prince. As His Highness had hinted, though, this name was no longer in use, as the coup d’état twenty years ago had spelled the end of the Ortan royal dynasty.

“Ah, so you’re aware. Yes, that’s exactly right.”

“The king of Orta was forced to live in exile in Linden, as I recall. Did his son go with him?”

“Yes. The two royal families have deep blood ties; the Ortan king was both second cousin and brother-in-law to the Lindenese king. It was only natural that he went to his sister’s husband seeking asylum. However, he died shortly afterwards, with his queen following a few years later. Their child, Lucio—Prince Gracius—was then raised in Linden.”

I nodded in understanding. This explained why he spoke Lindenese. Given his age, he’d have been a baby when he left Orta. Of course he’d be more familiar with Lindenese than the language of his homeland.

“Now the countries involved are Lagrange, Orta, Linden, and even Lavia,” I said, attempting to digest the information I’d picked up on so far. “It must surely be connected to the war. Lavia isn’t directly involved, but it’s also not in a position to stand idly by. Did they send Lutin as a way to help quietly without directly providing reinforcements?”

In response, His Highness folded his arms, disgruntled. Lord Simeon closed his eyes uncomfortably as well. Only Lutin wore a smirk of amusement.

“It seems you’ve taken the words right out of my mouth,” His Highness replied. “Don’t breathe a word of this to anyone, of course. I’d rather not have to lock you in a cell.”

Under the weight of his glare, I could do nothing but nod mechanically. I didn’t have to be told that information related to the war was not to be shared. He seemed to have decided it was safer to tell me everything and make sure I kept silent about it rather than leaving me with incomplete knowledge, but I still had to be especially careful.

“What else do you know already?”

“Hmm. Well, if I’m correct that it concerns the war, then would I be right in guessing that there’s a plan to restore the Ortan monarchy after the war and put Franz—put Prince Gracius on the throne? That would explain why the operatives are intent on killing him. They wish to put a stop to it. Only, it seems he also ran away from his allies and came here alone.”

His Highness shot Lord Simeon a cool gaze, but the latter quickly shook his head. “I told her no such thing.”

“Someone must have told her! She knows practically everything!”

“I believe she stood outside and listened to a portion of our conversation last night, but I can’t imagine it was enough to gain any useful information.”

“Then the only other possibility is...Lieutenant Lisnard?!”

When His Highness mentioned Alain’s name, a voice from beyond the door cried, “It wasn’t me!”

Lord Simeon and His Highness both furrowed their brows and glowered at me. Lutin, meanwhile, fell prostrate on the table, his back convulsing.

“I pieced it all together from the different snippets I’ve heard so far, that’s all. Lord Simeon, you mentioned to me that our biggest worry is the Slavian Empire expanding its power. Orta and Smerda serve as a kind of buffer zone, and Lagrange and Easdale are sending forces to support Smerda to ensure that it remains intact. You also said that we planned to bring Orta into our camp one day. However, I couldn’t understand how that would be possible if we defeated them in a war. Why would they be our allies after that? When I realized the Ortan crown prince was here among us, it all began to make sense.”

Lord Simeon looked up at the ceiling, astonished.

“This also made Marquess Rafale’s words slightly clearer. He said that Lagrange’s actions would go past merely sending reinforcements, implying that there were plans afoot that would have impact beyond the war itself. The marquess would undoubtedly have concerns if he knew Lagrange meant to intervene in another country’s internal affairs.”

I was met with a silent stare from His Highness.

“Your words also intrigued me,” I said, turning to the prince. “You said that Prince Gracius’s official name had no real meaning ‘as of now.’ That’s quite different from saying it has no meaning ‘anymore.’ It leaves open the possibility that the situation could change in the future—that the title might at some point be fully justified. Isn’t that right?”

The crown prince buried his face in his hands and heaved a long sigh. “Any and all conversation in front of Marielle is clearly rather risky business!”

All I’d done was answer the question I’d been asked, and yet he was reacting as though I’d done something wrong. True, I’d eavesdropped a tiny bit, but otherwise I’d done exactly what I was told.

“I’ve kept all this entirely in my head. I haven’t told a soul. Besides, it was only just now that I truly gained a complete picture.” I pouted, finding it rather unfair that I’d be villainized for this. “I have no intention of using it as a basis for my writing, either. Well, that may be exaggerating slightly, but I’m fully aware that I mustn’t do anything of the sort until the war is fully resolved. I know better than to be indiscriminate in my writing.”

After a moment’s hesitation, His Highness replied, “True, you are the sort who cares more about knowing information than talking about it. I understand you’re unlikely to loosen your lips. Still, though...”

Even while agreeing, it was clear he had mixed feelings.

Lutin finally sat up and applauded, still laughing. “A truly impressive performance, Marielle. No one can hope to compare to you.”

“You don’t need to make fun of me.”

“I’m praising you earnestly. You pieced together disparate bits of information and came to exactly the right conclusion. It’s something those in my profession do all the time, but you’ve received absolutely no training and had no one else to discuss it with. How could I be anything but impressed?” He leaned back in his chair and smiled mockingly at the two dispirited-looking men. “Imagine treating someone of your intellect like any other woman and trying to keep you in the dark. I can’t think of anything more foolish.”

“Her capabilities aren’t in question,” Lord Simeon shot back, casting a sour

look at Lutin beside him. “We can’t share such information with outsiders.”

“You’re essentially saying you don’t trust her. And yet, when she’s shrewd enough to discover the truth on her own, you blame and criticize her for it. I feel so sorry for you, Marielle. How awful to have a husband who tries to pin his own foolishness on you.”

Hearing these words of ridicule, Lord Simeon balled his hand into a tight fist on the table. He turned his whole body to face Lutin and replied in an even more acerbic tone.

“It’s not a matter of trust, either, but of rules and confidentiality. It’s straightforward information management. If the person in question inadvertently shares something, they could end up in danger themselves. It’s only natural to shield those who have no strict reason to be involved and would be unable to cope in such a situation.”

“So, you don’t believe you can keep her safe, in other words? You’re telling her to stay away because you can neither work together with her nor protect her. Is that any sort of relationship for a married couple? How laughable.”

Lord Simeon began to stand up. “What gives you *any* right to—”

His Highness banged violently on the table. This returned my husband to his senses, and he looked back over to our side of the table.

“None of this is relevant, and we have more important things to discuss,” chided the prince.

“Yes, indeed.” Lord Simeon resumed his seat and took on a calmer expression. “My apologies.”

He avoided looking at Lutin. His Highness graced the man’s flippant smile with little more than a sigh, then turned to me again. “Terribly sorry. You’ve done nothing wrong. I didn’t mean to accuse you, but somehow that was the tone I took, and I apologize.”

“That’s quite all right.”

“Let’s continue. With regard to Prince Gracius, the situation is exactly as you describe. Many members of the royal family were murdered at the time of the

coup. By now, he is the only one whose survival and whereabouts we are certain of, and he was already crown prince at the time of his exile, making him the only natural choice. Behind closed doors, we've been working on a plan to install him as king."

His tone was enough to brush aside the slightly unpleasant atmosphere that had emerged. I forgot about my own annoyance as well and listened intently.

"The most crucial aspect of the war is the cleanup that follows it. It all comes down to how we can ensure calm in Orta and keep them from aligning with Slavia. After secret discussions with other countries, it was decided that we would safeguard Prince Gracius in Lagrange, as Linden couldn't guarantee his safety."

"Is Linden in league with Slavia as well?" I asked with some nervous concern.

"No, that's not the reason. I don't have a map here so it might be tough to picture it, but a large portion of Linden's borders touch on the eastern powers. That meant they were unable to send troops to aid in this war. If they took any such action, Slavia and Teme would respond in a heartbeat."

I retrieved my notebook and pen from my pocket and passed them to His Highness, who drew a simple map on an empty page. The geography itself was familiar to me, but I had never seen it expressed in terms of power relationships before. When he explained it with a visual aid, I understood completely why Linden itself was under threat of invasion.

They had Orta to the south, Slavia and Teme to the north, and, to the east, a group of smaller countries that were all allied with Slavia. Excluding the portions that bordered on Lagrange and Vissel, they were surrounded by hostile forces.

"That does seem somewhat precarious."

I also understood why we needed Orta on our side. Currently, the lands to the west were slightly outnumbered. It was like a game where stones on the board were used to vie for dominion. If we could swap Orta's color, our territory would expand significantly.

"Linden placed the utmost importance on guarding Prince Gracius, of course, but there were many assassination attempts nonetheless. If Slavia had

mobilized its army directly while he lived there, he'd have been in even greater danger. That was why the decision was made to move him to Lagrange. However, that information was apparently not protected well enough. The traveling party was attacked shortly after crossing the border."

"By the Silver Fox and his men," I surmised.

"Indeed. General Mengibar is determined to hold onto power even if he loses this war, you see. We saw it coming of course, so this was no one-sided attack; the soldiers guarding him fought back. However, then something unexpected happened. Amid the pandemonium, Prince Gracius fled on his own."

So he had disappeared in the chaos of the attack. It was astounding that the men tasked with guarding him had managed to lose track of him, but then they couldn't have expected him to run from them when they were fighting so hard to keep him safe.

"An urgent message was sent to the palace, and thus, I was dispatched. Given the nature of the situation, it was deemed that someone should take direct command in the field who could make judgments on behalf of His Majesty."

"Ah, I see."

All was finally clear now that it had been explained to me. I could draw a direct line between the fragment of conversation I'd overheard and the actions of Prince Gracius.

My earlier thought that Prince Gracius might have run away from home turned out to be not entirely inaccurate. Only, I couldn't imagine why he'd decide to run away from his protectors. That definitely would make everyone's lives difficult, just as Alain had said. Why do that when there were foes trying to assassinate him?

"What do you intend to do next?" I asked. "Wait for Prince Gracius to recover, then bring him to Sans-Terre?"

"We'd like to, certainly." His Highness's voice had a ring of uncertainty.

When I frowned, puzzling over what the issue could be with that plan, Lutin interjected. "It's no good going home with the prince alone. They also need the item that represents a ruler's right to the Ortan throne: the Holy Crown of

Lorencio. To people of Orta, the crown is more important than the one that wears it.”

I’d heard this item mentioned not long ago. The Silver Fox had brought it up. “It sounds as though this crown has quite some historical significance.”

His Highness was taken aback. “I’m rather surprised that you don’t know all about it already. You seem to know everything else. Anyway, Orta was formed as a unified nation from several smaller allied counties, and when this occurred, the first to sit on the throne was Lorencio I. The crown made for him is known as the Holy Crown of Lorencio. Ever since, it’s held pride of place as the proof of one’s right to rule Orta. Anyone crowned without it won’t be accepted as the rightful monarch. The current military rulership merely stole their power—General Mengibar hasn’t founded a new dynasty. Although they are in fact ruling the country, they have no official justification for it.”

“So…” My head raced as I fought to keep up with all this information. *If Prince Gracius returns to Orta, he still won’t be accepted as the rightful king if he doesn’t have this particular crown?*

“You see, the royal family was rather unpopular before the revolution. They were abusing their power for personal gain. If General Mengibar had gotten his mitts on the crown, the people probably would have accepted him as their new ruler. He wouldn’t have been a usurper, but a hero.”

“And the crown has gone missing?”

His Highness nodded, his face grim. “The former king took it with him when he fled into exile, and Prince Gracius inherited it. It was brought with him when he was being transported to Lagrange as well, but it disappeared when he ran away. Obviously it’s most likely that he took it, but apparently he had no such treasure on him when he was taken in. We’ve searched the building high and low and found no sign of the crown.”

It’s gone missing? Well, surely Prince Gracius must at least know where it is. When the Silver Fox confronted him, it was fairly clear he was lying. Rather than losing it, he probably hid it somewhere on purpose.

As I recalled that moment, something else the prince had said came back to me. He said he’d been wanting to get rid of it for years. That part hadn’t come

across as a lie. *Does he not want to be king at all? Is that why he ran away?*

Now it was time for His Highness to ask me a question. “Marielle, have any thoughts occurred to you? You interacted with Prince Gracius, did you not?”

I reached back into my memories, then shook my head. “Nothing that seems relevant. Just to ask, is the reason the Silver Fox is looking for the crown because General Men...Men...”

“Mengibar.”

“Because he wishes to become king?”

“I suspect not. The lay of the land has changed over the past twenty years. At the time he had a great number of supporters, but ultimately it was only a change in leadership without any material improvement, so the populace has grown dissatisfied. Actually, the military’s rash behavior in plunging the country into a war is judged as only having made matters worse. A coronation at this late stage would do nothing to improve the general’s standing.”

“Why, then?” I turned my gaze toward Lord Simeon. Since his argument with Lutin, he’d remained completely silent.

“Even if the current Prince Gracius were to die,” he said at last, “he has plenty of blood relatives in Linden. As long as they have the crown, it would be possible for one of them to inherit the Ortan throne.”

He still appeared collected on the surface, and he spoke in his usual tone. However, rather than looking me straight in the eye, he looked down very slightly, clutching his hands together on the table with an excess of tension. His voice was somehow *too* cool, even hard.

I could tell immediately that he had feelings he was trying to keep concealed, and I was sure His Highness could as well. As for Lutin, it was hard to be sure due to his ever-present grin.

I know the two of them are natural enemies, but sometimes it still surprises me just how much my husband hates Lutin. Is he upset because what Lutin said cut too close to the bone? Did he hit the nail on the head with his comments, in other words?

Lord Simeon continued, “The reason they didn’t kill Prince Gracius as soon as they found him was that without the Holy Crown, they can’t prevent us from carrying out our plan. Even though Slavia is supporting them from the shadows, they won’t enter the war directly. They’re still at the stage of watching how matters proceed and judging how it will affect them. In all likelihood, they’ve deemed it likely that Orta will lose this war. To prevent their all-important ally from abandoning them, the Ortan military leadership must be trying to prevent the restoration of the monarchy at all costs.”

“I see,” I replied slowly. *This keeps getting more and more complicated. I might have to draw a diagram to keep it all organized or I’ll struggle to keep track.*

I summed up everything I’d heard in my notebook, then glanced over the key points. Leaving aside the tangled background details, there were two pressing concerns. One was keeping Prince Gracius safe and getting him to Ventvert Palace, and the other was recovering the Holy Crown of Lorencio. The first of those already looked promising, but that left the crown as a major worry.

“I suppose we’ll have to ask Prince Gracius,” said Lord Simeon. “Hopefully it won’t be too long before he comes to.”

It was almost sundown. Lord Simeon and the others discussed what to do next. Even after regaining consciousness, Prince Gracius would need to rest for a while, so they didn’t want to move him too much. Still, they weren’t comfortable leaving him at the church. The Ortan operatives could easily slip in amongst the many people going in and out, and any new attempt to capture him could put the priest and the other locals in danger.

As such, they decided he would be moved to the Lespinasse manor as soon as possible that evening. A message was sent to ensure preparations were made to receive him, and in the meantime they waited for him to wake up. To avoid getting in the way of the knights rushing back and forth, I went outside alone.

The sun had been hidden behind the clouds all day, so it was quite chilly. When I went around to the back of the church, I saw that most of the vegetables in the patch had been picked, leaving only the remnants of the harvesting. They must have been generously shared with the locals as part of

the emergency food distribution. In the corners, next to the neat rows of raised earth, small wildflowers were in bloom.

The graveyard was in a sorry state as well. The flowers that had been placed on the grave of Lord Simeon's great aunt had been scattered by the wind and soaked by the rain. *How awful! Those flowers were placed there with prayers for the deceased to rest in peace and have a joyous rebirth, and now look at them.*

I gathered them up, ignoring how wet my hands got, and put back all the ones that weren't completely ruined. The grave of the child who had died just a few days earlier was similarly in disarray. I looked around for the stuffed toy, which had rolled quite far away, and replaced it in front of the grave. It was covered in mud and looked quite sad.

As I was wondering if I might be able to clean it, Lord Simeon arrived. He didn't have any of his men with him, suggesting it was nothing urgent.

"Marielle, there you are."

"Has Prince Gracius woken up?"

"Not yet." He walked closer and looked down at the grave by my feet in some puzzlement. "I assume this isn't Alette's grave."

"No, this one belongs to a child, I was told. One who died very recently. Your great aunt's grave is that one over there."

I pointed to it. Since he'd missed the funeral, it was natural that he'd want to pay his respects now that he was here. He stood by her grave and offered a prayer.

He appeared to be moving with no difficulty, but I was still concerned about his wound. The stain on his sleeve hadn't dulled in color yet, still looking as vivid as fresh blood, which certainly drew the eye. Without even thinking about it, I found myself rubbing my left arm. Although my stab wound hadn't been life-changing or caused any long-term effects, it had hurt a great deal at the time. I'd never felt such pain before, and I could only imagine that a bullet was far worse than a knife.

When he happened to look back and catch my gaze, he smiled softly. "It's

quite all right, I promise you. You needn't worry."

"You wouldn't make a fuss no matter how much pain you were in. I can't exactly take your word for it."

Chuckling, he lifted up his arm and moved it around. Rather than reassuring me, it only made me more nervous.

"I'll tell you all about it another time. It's not the sort of story one would normally tell a lady, but I suspect it will make good reference material for you. When it comes to gunshot wounds, the wound itself is a bother of course, but the real fear is the risk of gangrene. When a bullet penetrates the body, it destroys the surrounding flesh, and gangrene spreads from there. However, in this case the bullet only grazed me, which won't lead to gangrene. The bullet isn't inside my body, so there's no risk of lead poisoning either. The worst that could happen is an infection. The wound was carefully sterilized by the doctor, so there's honestly nothing to worry about."

"But it must hurt."

He lowered his arm and used it to pull me closer to him. His large hand felt the area where the scar was on my left arm.

"You suffered a more painful wound than this and endured it like a champion. As a man, I'm not about to make a fuss over this degree of pain. Breaking a bone was far worse."

"You've broken a bone before?!"

I was shocked that he could say such a thing so casually. He smiled, his expression suggesting this was nothing out of the ordinary. "A few injuries are inevitable during training, but the circumstances behind this were...somewhat different. For reasons I cannot fathom, Adrien once decided to run up a vertical wall. He started throwing his feet up onto the wall, but obviously he only got halfway before falling. If it were Noel I'd have been able to hold him with no difficulty, but Adrien is as big as I am, so when I caught him, I fell backwards onto the ground along with him, trapping my arm."

Lord Adrien, what were you thinking?!

"When was this?"

“He was around fifteen, but he was an early bloomer, so he was already as tall as he is now.”

“Fifteen feels a little old for that sort of thing, I must say.”

I thought back to what I’d heard my mother-in-law say about Lord Adrien always acting the fool and hurting himself. *So that’s the sort of behavior she was referring to. This is the trouble with boys!*

“This occurred while I was on leave, so I returned to the military academy with my arm in a sling. Even, so I wasn’t exempted from training and did virtually everything I would have done otherwise. It was rather educational, actually. I learned how to fight while injured.”

“Oh my!”

“I have many more grisly anecdotes from my time at the academy, including some that would make you faint. An injury of this caliber doesn’t even make the list.”

He said all this calmly, with the face of a fairy-tale Prince Charming. I’d never have imagined any of this while gazing at him from afar at balls and garden parties. Behind the strength of that dashing handsome knight, the tall white lily that drew all eyes and was the object of every girl’s desires, was training full of blood, sweat, and tears.

I put my arm around him and held him tightly. *I know he’s fine, but now I’m worried he might be too accustomed to injuries. It might make him complacent. What if he suffers a serious wound and brushes it off as nothing?*

“Please be careful,” I told him. “Don’t push yourself too hard.”

“It feels odd to be the one hearing that from you.”

His laughter made me pout sullenly. I looked up, starting to protest that I’d done nothing I wasn’t supposed to on this trip—but then I once again sensed a shadow behind his smile. It couldn’t be due to Lutin’s goading comments. That had long since passed by now. Was there something more serious bothering him?

“Lord Sime—”

But I was interrupted by a sudden sound from the direction of the mountains. It sounded like a woman's voice emitting a long, shrill cry. However, it was less like a scream and more like the cry of a wild animal. The ominous voice made me shudder. I'd let Lord Simeon go, but I clung to him again now.

"What was that?" I exclaimed.

Lord Simeon was not shocked at all. He looked at me curiously. "Have you never heard it before? It's the sound of a deer."

"A deer?"

That wasn't the word I'd been expecting. The high-pitched noise repeated.

"Now that you mention it, I did think it sounded like an animal. Still, is that really the sound a deer makes? I imagined something cuter."

Absent any other information, I'd definitely have concluded it was a woman screaming. It would have made a fine basis for a ghost story as well. The sound was so tough to reconcile with a deer's sweet appearance that I was almost disappointed.

"That's the call of a male claiming its territory. When a mother and child call to one another, it's shorter and more gentle."

"Goodness."

I wonder if the tale of the wailing woman passed down in Easdale stemmed from someone hearing the cry of a deer and mistaking it for a human voice. It was an intriguing thought. It occurred to me that the deer must be suffering a great deal in the rain as well, which made my former unease give way to melancholy.

"Speaking of deer, the crest of the Ortan royal family is a deer, isn't it? Perhaps it's a guardian deity encouraging Prince Gracius!"

"What a fine way to think of it. I can see why you're an author."

While praising me, he patted my head with his large hand. *Is he treating me like a child? I get the sense that perhaps a grown woman shouldn't be finding such joy in an idea like that. Well, I can't help it.*

As I stood there with severely mixed feelings, Alain ran into the graveyard.

“Vice Captain!”

The moment he saw us nestling close to one another, he instantly took on a look of awkward discomfort, but it didn’t slow him down.

Lord Simeon let go of me and turned around. “What is it?”

“Prince Gracius has come around.”

“Oh, good.” Relief filled Lord Simeon’s face.

I felt similarly, but before I could express my own happiness at the news, Alain continued with a gloomy expression. “He doesn’t seem dizzy or nauseous, and he can speak. He’s in stable condition. Only...”

“Is there some problem?”

Alain nodded. After hearing his concise explanation, we hurried to the prince’s side.

When we entered the room, the prince was trying to sit up and being prevented from doing so. He brushed aside the hand of the doctor, who was telling him he had to keep resting. Lutin, who was leaning against the wall by the door, greeted us with a shrug.

“Tell me where I am! Who are you people?! Isaac! Where is Isaac?!”

“Calm down, please,” said His Highness, rebuking the prince in place of the doctor, who couldn’t speak Lindenese. “You hit your head. All this fussing is not good for you.”

Agitated, Prince Gracius grimaced and pressed a hand against the side of his head. “Who are you?!”

He glared at His Highness with undisguised suspicion. His Highness told the doctor to stand back, then sat down on the chair by the bed to speak to Prince Gracius at eye level.

“I’m the crown prince of Lagrange, Severin Hugues de Lagrange, making your acquaintance for the first time.”

“Lagrange?” he said after a wary pause.

“When we received word that you had gone missing, I set out to command

the search party. This is a town to the west of Chanmery, where your traveling party was attacked.”

“Attacked?”

His answers came sluggishly, and his expression said he didn’t fully understand the words he was hearing. Though he should have been aware of all this, having walked all the way here on his own two feet, he responded as though this was the first he’d ever heard about any of it.

Observing cautiously, His Highness tried to ascertain what he did know. “You were set upon by Ortan assassins while journeying to the Lagrangian capital, Sans-Terre. Does that ring a bell?”

No response.

“Do you recall leaving Konstantinsburg?”

Nothing.

“Can you tell me what month and year it is, perhaps?”

Whatever question was asked, Prince Gracius was unable to muster a word. It didn’t appear that he was refusing to, but rather that he didn’t know what the answers were.

His Highness heaved a heavy sigh. While my husband and I stood stock still in bewilderment, Lutin said, almost to himself, “Quite a predicament. He hardly knows up from down, let alone where the crown is hidden.”

From outside the window, I heard the deer cry again. The guardian deity’s encouragement was failing to help him at this moment.



Chapter Eight

Prince Gracius had only lost his memory for recent events. Once he'd had a chance to calm down slightly, he was able to talk about his life in Linden, including details about himself, the staff around him, and so on. He remembered all of this clearly, but as soon as talk turned to his departure from Linden to go to Lagrange, everything grew hazy.

He was made to lie down again. His blue eyes glared straight at the ceiling. We went out into the corridor, where the doctor explained his condition to His Highness and Lord Simeon.

"It's a common symptom of a concussion, but even more significant memory impairment tends to easily heal in young people. There's a high likelihood that he'll remember everything in due course, so there's no cause for pessimism. However, there is a chance that further symptoms will develop, so please be cautious."

"Such as?" asked His Highness.

"Aphasia is a common one. The patient becomes unable to formulate words normally and communicate meaning. Thus far there are no indications of this, but other possibilities could be an inability to understand where he is or remember directions. He may get lost and be unable to go back to where he was, for example, so please be vigilant and avoid letting him out of your sight."

I knew that head trauma could be serious, but hearing this underlined it even further. We couldn't see inside his head, so there was nothing to really be done. Though we all hoped it never got any worse than the memory loss he was already experiencing, we feared the worst.

The knight responsible looked very sheepish. "I'm so sorry. I was trying to cover him, but I used too much force."

He had knocked Prince Gracius into a wall, and apparently the prince had hit his head again when he then fell to the ground. His attempt to protect the

prince had backfired, leaving him unable to do anything but apologize awkwardly.

It was a mistake, to be sure, but it was hard to blame the knight too harshly. Just getting him out of the Silver Fox and company's clutches had been difficult enough. Taking the operatives by surprise and pulling him away was only the beginning when there were muzzles being pointed straight at them. Lord Simeon wasn't the only member of the Order who had been hurt, and it was actually quite a relief that no one had been injured more gravely.

Neither His Highness nor Lord Simeon criticized him too harshly. More important than complaining about what had already happened was considering what to do next, so they took Lutin with them to discuss this elsewhere. A number of knights stood guard outside the room where Prince Gracius was recovering, while the remaining ones went outside to patrol the area around the church and watch for anyone suspicious approaching.

When His Highness left, he asked me to stay behind and act as an interpreter. No one among the knights could speak Lindenese, and Prince Gracius could only speak a smattering of Lagrangian. An interpreter was the only practical solution. I had no objections, of course. He needed people around him other than guards, I felt.

Gently, I approached and spoke to him. "How are you feeling? If you're hungry or you'd like a hot drink, please tell me. I'll go and fetch you something."

I was expecting a rejection, since he was in such a state of confusion and hadn't been easy to get along with in the first place. However, his reply was unexpectedly placid. "I am quite hungry, actually. I wouldn't mind something hot to eat."

"Certainly! I'll be back with it soon."

Glad that he'd been so forthright in asking, I hurried straight to the church's kitchen. A great deal of food had been amassed for the evacuees; aside from the ingredients contributed by House Lespinasse, there was still a heap of vegetables harvested from the patch behind the church.

I asked the woman in charge of arranging the food, who kindly started preparing a serving for one person. While I waited, I asked my father-in-law,

who happened to present, for an update. “How does the flood damage look?”

He’d gone to inspect the damage along with Lord Lespinasse, and was now eating in a corner of the kitchen to avoid getting under anybody’s feet. I wondered how the locals would react if they knew that this baby-faced old gentleman who was sharing the emergency rations and apparently finding them quite delicious was the head of one of the most famous noble houses in the kingdom, which even had close ties to the royal family. Seeing him like this, I could understand why he got along well with my father despite the large difference in status.

“Nothing worse than expected. If the weather continues to clear up, the water will soon recede. The submerged fields and houses won’t be easy to clean up, but the kingdom will provide subsidies if a report is sent.”

Grinning, he added that he was glad there was hot soup to eat. Even though the rain had stopped, the wind was still strong, so it had to have been cold walking around outside.

“That does sound good.”

The woman preparing the food called me over. In addition to the hearty, nourishing soup, she supplied bread baked golden brown and layered with melted cheese and thickly sliced bacon. She also supplied a cup of tea filled with soothing herbs. I thanked her for the kind hospitality and left the kitchen.

As I set off back to Prince Gracius’s bedside, I bumped into someone passing me on their way into the kitchen.

“I’m glad *someone’s* in a good mood,” the daughter-in-law of Lady Lespinasse muttered with a huff before pushing past me. Some of the hot soup spilled onto my hand, so I took my hand off the tray and blew on it.

She really doesn’t seem to like me. Does she dislike that I’m so close to His Highness and the knights? Surely she realizes I haven’t merely been playing around today.

It was a feeling I hadn’t felt in some time, but a familiar one. A year ago, it had been commonplace. My engagement to Lord Simeon had resulted in barbed comments being made about me wherever I went. My heart trembled with a

sensation that was a fond memory by now.

This is what I've been missing! Being pampered and fawned over is no way of life for me. Everyone needs to be more honest, more direct, so I can have more material!

So far I'd only ever written books that ended with the central couple coming together, but now that I was learning ever more about married life, I was starting to think a story about a young lady marrying into money might be a good option. I imagined the scenario: her husband loves her, but she's picked on by the rest of the family and suffers a great deal. Even her mother-and father-in-law are cold to her.

Hmm, my own in-laws won't give me a lot of material for that. I suppose there are plenty of other examples in society I could draw from. Alternatively, what if it's a marriage of convenience and her husband is cold to her initially? They're already married at the start, but the theme of the story is how they can form an emotional bond with each other.

The problem is that if I don't write it well enough, readers will hate the husband. It will be a challenge, but that only fuels my creative urges. Wouldn't it be satisfying to have a protagonist who breaks down his walls by virtue of her inherent optimism? Her husband would find himself unable to simply disregard her, and would ultimately fall in love. The readership would fangirl just as hard as I am! I have to write it!

All sorts of ideas flashed into my mind as I walked back along the corridor. The guards outside the room met me with puzzled faces. *Am I wearing a strange grin?* Telling myself I had to be presentable, I pulled myself together.

"Apologies for the wait," I said while entering.

Looking around, I was stymied by the lack of any table on which to put the tray. Thinking about it, none of the bedrooms in the church's living quarters had tables that could be used for eating as far as I'd seen. As I stood puzzling over what to do, Prince Gracius quickly sat up. A knight on duty inside the room hurriedly ran over to offer his help, but the prince waved him off.

I placed the tray in his lap, and he set about eating that way. He ate with great enthusiasm, at no point complaining that the food was beneath his standards.

Watching him, my own stomach started to rumble. I realized I hadn't eaten lunch today. I'd simply forgotten all about it. *I should have gotten something for myself in the kitchen. Perhaps I can go there again afterwards.*

The wind rattled the glass in the window. As I stood staring through it, after a while Prince Gracius murmured the beginnings of a question. "Are you...?"

"Hmm? Is something the matter?"

"I'm wondering who you are, that's all. I thought you were some kind of servant, but that doesn't seem to be the case. And is that a mourning dress?"

I looked down at my clothes. "Ah yes." The black dress was now covered in mud and dirt from running around and ending up in the middle of a fight. It definitely was not suitable attire for attending to a prince. "I'm sorry for my unsightly appearance. I came here for a relative's funeral."

"Oh, a member of your family passed away?"

His gaze seemed to shift down to my hands. *Is he looking at my wedding ring? I assure you, my husband is in good health! I'm not a widow!*

"Sort of. The family I recently married into has relatives that live in this region. We live in Sans-Terre, but we've traveled here to attend a funeral among their family."

"I see."

"I should have introduced myself sooner, but my name is Marielle Flaubert. Do you remember the blond-haired military officer who was in here earlier? That's my husband, Simeon. We were united through a series of strange circumstances, in turn leading me to end up here, helping you."

"Flaubert... As in the famous earldom?"

"Precisely. The head of the family and his wife are here as well, actually, but they're rather preoccupied right now. The town was struck by torrential rain, so they're working to help the locals. I know they should come to introduce themselves, but that will have to wait. I hope you can forgive them for now."

He shook his head. "No need for that. Can you tell them not to bother? Oh, wait, how rude of me. I shouldn't be so discourteous to the wife of a future

earl.”

“That’s quite all right.”

Goodness, his attitude certainly has changed from earlier today. My appearance is the same, so he couldn’t have truly thought I was a servant even when we first met. The prestige of the Flaubert name has a surprisingly powerful effect.

My conclusion, though, was that this was the real Prince Gracius. He had to have been exhausted before. He’d almost been assassinated, and then he’d run away and hidden from both his foes and his allies. It was hardly surprising that he’d lost some of his self-control, especially when his masculine pride was wounded by being unable to lift the heavy stove.

“Are you sure it’s all right for you to sit up for so long? Lying down may be better for you.” The doctor had also told him to rest as much as possible.

Prince Gracius shook his head, however. “I feel absolutely fine. My head hurts slightly, but that’s what I’d expect after hitting it.”

“There’s a plan to move you elsewhere soon, so it would be ideal if you could sleep until then.”

“I don’t think I’ll manage that. It’s too uncomfortable.”

I glanced at the bed. *Oh, I see.* The modest frame had only a thin mattress; I suspected I’d have found it painful to sleep on as well. *He might have endured some very literal sleepless nights since the priest took him in.*

“Where am I, exactly? What sort of place is this?”

“It’s a church, Your Highness. These are the priest’s living quarters.”

“‘Lucio’ is fine. No need for any of this ‘Your Highness’ business. A grand title like that is utterly meaningless for an orphan forced out of his country.”

He spoke in a dismissive manner about his own status, quite the opposite to the proud attitude he’d shown when mocked by the Silver Fox.

“It’s true that you’re a direct descendent of the Ortal royal line, though, isn’t it?”

“That doesn’t mean you have to be so annoyingly polite. It’s been twenty years since Orta stopped being a kingdom. What’s the use in throwing around a title like ‘crown prince’ at this point? No one really acknowledges me as crown prince.”

“I don’t think that’s—”

“Being shown endless respect when all I have is a title and nothing to show for it is a miserable existence. Don’t call me ‘Your Highness,’ just ‘Lucio.’ That’s good enough.”

He turned his face away. Even though he was a grown man and older than I was, he looked like a dejected young boy.

It does sound like a difficult position to be in, I realized after musing for a moment. *I’m sure it can be quite draining at times.*

“In that case, I shall call you Lord Lucio. Feel free to call me Marielle.”

He looked back, clear relief on his face that I’d accepted his request. “Great.” He paused. “Marielle, you’re married, aren’t you?”

“That’s right.”

“Pretty young to be married already.”

My having pulled back on the formality had apparently allowed Prince Gracius to take on a more casual tone as well. It seemed he’d been trying very hard to be polite until now. When he spoke like this, he indeed came across more as an ordinary young man than a prince.

“People tend to assume I’m younger than I really am. I’m actually nineteen.”

“Huh. Really?”

“Yes. What was your guess, incidentally?”

“I suppose about fifteen, maybe.”

My eyebrows shot up. “Now that is an unreasonable guess. Might I suggest you look into glasses, Lord Lucio?”

“The problem is that you look too much like a child. That’s all.”

“Honestly, now!”

It's true that everyone is always telling me that. Even the Silver Fox said words to that effect. Still, fifteen is a ridiculously low guess! I certainly don't look THAT young! Ugh, how can I create an impression that has more adult allure? I'll have to ask the Three Flowers to mentor me when I get back to Sans-Terre.

As I frowned in frustration, Prince Gracius laughed at me. Seeing his troubled expression soften, my impression of him continued to change. He really looked like any other young man. I hoped to see him laugh even more. Perhaps smiles and joy would have a positive effect on his mindset and help to bring his memories back more quickly.

For a while, we continued to engage in trivial banter. Both of us consciously avoided any mention of the serious situation in which we found ourselves. Brooding over it would only darken his mood, and for now I wanted him to relax and avoid focusing on anything too weighty.

I did wish I could ask him where the Holy Crown was hidden, but there wasn't much use if he didn't even remember running off with it.

We were so absorbed in our pleasant chat that we didn't notice the door opening. When we realized that Prince Severin was standing there, we finally stopped. Seeing Prince Gracius engaged in friendly conversation, His Highness looked rather surprised. "How's your condition? We'd like to get you moving, but only if you'll be all right."

"It won't be a problem," Prince Gracius replied, the smile vanishing from his face. In contrast to His Highness's affable tone, the prince had immediately put his guard up.

He refused all help from the knights, pulling off the blanket and putting his shoes on himself. I offered my hand when he stood, fearing that it could be quite dangerous if he stumbled, and thankfully he took it without objection.

"This way," said His Highness, stepping outside.

Lord Simeon and Lutin were in the corridor as well. When I met my husband's gaze, he immediately looked away. *There is definitely something about his attitude. I wonder what's wrong.* Still, this wasn't the time or place to ask him, so I simply followed Prince Gracius outside.

A carriage had been sent by House Lespinasse. To prevent the locals from getting near, it was being closely guarded by knights. Among the curious onlookers, I caught sight of the priest.

I approached Prince Severin and surreptitiously asked if he had a moment.

“What is it?”

“The priest is over there. I know Prince Gracius doesn’t remember, but he owes the priest his life. Wouldn’t it be rude for him to leave suddenly without even a word of goodbye? Couldn’t you speak to him quickly?”

The priest had taken in and safeguarded a foreigner who had arrived under mysterious circumstances, and was no doubt still worried about him. Prince Gracius couldn’t have wanted to involve him or any of the locals, so if he had still remembered, he’d no doubt have thanked him personally.

His Highness looked over at the priest, but after considering it for a moment, he shook his head. “Saying something like that at this moment will only cause Prince Gracius further confusion. We can explain it to the priest later and give him a suitable thank-you.”

“In that case, I’ll go and speak to him quietly.”

I could see how making a scene would only cause more trouble right now. With that in mind, I turned to walk over to the priest, but His Highness pulled me back by the collar.

“No time for you to dilly-dally either. Hurry up and get in the carriage.”

“I didn’t realize I was coming along.”

“He can’t be without his interpreter.” He drew closer and whispered in my ear. “Besides, for all we know the Ortans are spying on us right now. We don’t want to get too friendly with the locals for their own sake.”

It hadn’t occurred to me that the Silver Fox could be watching. A chill ran through me, and I took a furtive glance at my surroundings.

“The Silver Fox suspects the crown might be hidden at the church. The priest and his helpers are already in danger.”

“We’ll leave some guards with them, of course. However, if we get too

chummy with the locals, the Ortans will think they know what's afoot and are assisting us with that in mind. I realize it seems a tad unjust, but the best thing to do right now is pretend they have nothing to do with us."

"Very well," I replied. It was a reasonable sentiment. Perhaps it would wound some feelings in the meantime, but that was better than endangering anyone.

That was when a thought occurred to me. *When Lord Simeon was trying to keep me out of the loop, was that his mindset?*

"Simeon, stop looking so damned foreboding! Your wife and I are only talking!"

My husband's name found His Highness's lips at the very moment I thought of him. When I looked over at Lord Simeon, he once again averted his gaze.

"What an insufferable bore he is," His Highness grumbled as he pushed me into the carriage.

I thought of mentioning that his feelings were rather sensitive at the moment, but realizing how this might affect my husband's honor, I thought better of it and kept my mouth closed.

Three of us—Prince Gracius, Prince Severin, and I—entered the carriage. The door was closed, and we were driven to the Lespinasse manor surrounded by an escort. Once we arrived, Prince Gracius was put to bed in the room that had been arranged for him, and quickly fell asleep again. Even though he'd lost his memories, this did nothing to dispel the days of exhaustion, and a comfortable bed seemed to be exactly what he needed to release his tension. At one point I noticed he wasn't replying anymore, and then I noticed his soft, rhythmic breathing.

Getting some rest was good for him. I left him behind with only the guards in order to let him sleep.

I then returned to my own guest room alone. Rushing around all day had left me quite worn out. At first I intended to rest there until dinnertime, but my empty stomach soon made the wait unbearable.

I wonder what form dinner will take this evening? The servants still left at the manor are awfully busy, so I doubt there'll be a formal meal served at the table.

I'm sure they'll cook something, but I'm not sure I trust them not to forget about me. These things do happen.

The more I thought about it, the more certain I became. People tended to forget I was there even when I was standing right in front of them, so if I waited around in my room like a good little girl, it was a near certainty. *I don't mind otherwise, honestly I don't, except when it goes as far as not getting anything to eat.*

In the end, I decided to endure the embarrassment and go to the kitchen myself. However, as soon as I descended the stairs to the below-ground level and entered the kitchen, I ran into the daughter-in-law, who had evidently returned to the manor.

"You don't think anywhere's off-limits to you, do you?" she said brusquely.

Elsewhere in the kitchen were some cooks and younger maids grappling with a large quantity of ingredients next to an enormous cooking pot.

"Terrible sorry, I'm just so hungry. I wanted to see if I might be able to have something to eat."

I was in desperate need of sustenance, so I had to pull out all the stops, even if that meant emphasizing my own existence rather than hiding away. *I won't back down until my belly is full. I know you're all busy, but I'm in a desperate situation too!*

But the young lady just frowned and snorted. "Excuse me?" After a moment she added, "That is rather a surprise. Who'd have thought a lady from such a renowned noble house would come begging for scraps? Such unspeakably gluttonous behavior."

Her words were cold and cut deep. *Yes, I know. It's thoroughly unbefitting of a noblewoman. If my mother-in-law were here, I'm sure she'd scold me harshly.*

I would have done the respectable thing and flagged down a servant to ask them about dinner, but there was no one anywhere on the second floor. Their numbers were still heavily depleted as many were still out helping the townspeople, and no doubt they were making a concerted effort to avoid approaching the knights standing guard.

This meant I hadn't even been able to change clothes. We'd decided to travel with a small party to avoid burdening House Lespinasse in their relatively small manor, so neither I nor my mother-in-law had brought our lady's maids. I was stuck wearing my heavily soiled mourning dress.

This is a lesson for next time. If I'm traveling any great distance, bring some emergency rations and outfits I can put on without assistance.

"Dinner's not ready yet. You'll have to wait."

Then she rudely turned away and sank her teeth into the ham sandwich she was holding.

Yes, she was eating at this very moment. Despite her admonishments, she, too, was hungry and unable to wait until dinner. I'd arrived just as she was enjoying a between-meals snack at the kitchen table.

The servants preparing the food glanced our way briefly.

After a sip of her milky coffee, the daughter-in-law continued, "It's all fun and games for you, isn't it? You have no idea what we've been going through. We've been so busy already with Lady Alette's funeral, and then there was all this flooding. With more and more unannounced guests on top of that, we can hardly cope anymore. Not all of us can spend our time fawning over a prince and smiling sweetly for his favor. My mother-in-law made me work like a common maid all day. It was one order after another."

After finishing her sandwich, she nibbled on some raisins. This region was famed for its wine, but it seemed they found plenty of other uses for the grapes grown here.

"Can you hear me? You need to leave. I can scarcely believe you even entered the kitchen wearing such filthy clothes. Are you entirely lacking in common sense?"

"My apologies," I said, retreating with a heavy heart.

Her tone had been unnecessarily hostile, but she did have a point. The members of this household had been under a lot of strain. I could hardly blame her for venting her anger. *She could have found a more appropriate target, though. I've been through the wringer as well!*

I've partly achieved my goal, I suppose. Now they'll definitely make dinner for me...probably. Won't they? Well, my mother-and father-in-law will need to eat here as well. They wouldn't forget about me and let me starve, surely.

Even so, my spirits were extremely low. My stomach was rumbling, and the cold and hunger left me feeling quite wretched. *It's good material, at least. To think I'd personally experience a moment like this.* Still, it was hard to feel much joy in that.

When I trudged back to the staircase, I noticed a man leaning against a wall nearby. Lutin, who had vanished at some point, had now reappeared as if from nowhere.

He offered a compassionate smile. "What a bully she is." Evidently he'd heard my conversation just now. "She's not even from a noble background, you know. Her father was a wealthy farmer. From her point of view, she has married into wealth and fortune. When a real young noblewoman arrived from the capital, and she saw how different you are from your clothes to your very nature, she took an instant dislike. It didn't help that you're close to the prince she's required to stay away from. That truly stoked her envy."

"Impressive spy work. Was it really necessary to investigate her?"

"I didn't. All I did was overhear some maids gossiping about her."

He moved away from the wall and stopped in front of me, then pulled a small bag out of his pocket.

"Open your mouth."

"What?"

Before I had time to react any further, his outstretched hand placed something into my mouth. In shock, I tried to bat his hand away and was about to spit out whatever it was, but I stopped when I tasted it.

So sweet.

"Is it rock candy?"

"Perfect to soothe an empty stomach, wouldn't you say?" He took my hand and passed the bag to me.

“You must have quite a sweet tooth to be carrying that around.”

“In a pinch, it serves as an emergency fuel supply. Circumstances don’t always allow for a proper meal. Sometimes I may be thoroughly exhausted but unable to abandon my task, so I need an ace up my sleeve.”

It sounded like a kind of secret spy trick. Appreciative, I made a note in my mental notebook. *This is advice I can make use of in my work and in real life.*

“Thank you. I wouldn’t want to take them all though. Won’t you need the rest?”

I tried to return the bag, but Lutin pushed it back into my hands. “I have plenty more, so I’ll gladly give you these. Perhaps I might have a single kiss as repayment?”

“I am truly grateful. May God offer you his divine protection.”

I withdrew my hand and returned only a smile. A kiss on the cheek wouldn’t have been inappropriate between friends, but I was sure he wouldn’t have left it there. It was imperative to be careful around this fellow.

I knew that he was probably just joking so that I would take the sweets without resistance. He didn’t insist any further. “I’ve never received God’s favor before,” he said with an ironic smile. “I doubt my name features anywhere on his list.”

“Divine protection isn’t something you expect to receive. It happens without you even knowing it.”

“Sadly, I don’t see much point in being grateful to an invisible being. In terms of who’s actually given me support in my life, I’d count Prince Liberto primarily—although I’ve repaid him and then some.”

I hid my surprise. It was rare for Lutin to talk about himself. Prince Liberto was the future grand duke of Lavia. The youngest princess of my country, Henriette, was engaged to him. I’d suspected this already, but he’d all but confirmed that his orders came not from the current grand duke, but from Prince Liberto.

“Yes, I suppose Prince Liberto is essentially your god.”

“He’s a god, is he?” he replied, looking away. I sensed a meaningful

undercurrent to his words.

“At the least, he’s widely deemed to be of good character. Is that not the case?”

“Oh, yes, that’s true, of course. He’s a fine person indeed.”

It was readily apparent that these empty words were meant as a deflection. I was intensely curious and a little concerned. *Princess Henriette isn’t about to marry someone of questionable character, is she?*

He took on a cheeky air and he moved closer in one swift motion. “When it comes to gods, *you’re* certainly a goddess to me.”

A further attempt to distract me. I deftly sidestepped him and began to walk up the stairs, but immediately stopped, surprised. “Oh!” I exclaimed.

At the top of the staircase, about to walk down, was Lord Simeon. *Why is Lord Simeon visiting the lowest level? Is he hungry too? No, that can’t be it. Lord Simeon wouldn’t come begging for food like me. Besides, his expression is thunderous.*

I shoved the bag Lutin had given me into my pocket. It wasn’t something to be overly secretive about, but it still seemed best to avoid showing it to Lord Simeon. I chewed and swallowed the sweet I still had in my mouth.

Lutin looked up and noticed him there as well. My husband quickened his pace and put an arm around me when he reached the bottom of the stairs.

“You shouldn’t walk around the manor on your own. You might be beset by horrible vermin just waiting for you to drop your guard.”

Even though they were cooperating on this mission, that had clearly done nothing to mend fences between them. As undaunted as ever, Lutin replied, “She was forced to come here alone because no one gave her the help she needed. Your poor wife was starved half to death and her husband was too busy being a faithful lapdog to his master to even notice. Imagine being so single-minded.”

Though his glare was as sharp as a blade, Lord Simeon turned his head away rather than answering. Then he walked back up the stairs, taking me with him.

Lutin didn't follow and add any further comments, so the stormy mood dissipated, to my relief.

We returned to my room. Lord Simeon closed the door behind me and then stood there, lost in thought, forgetting even to let go of my shoulders.

"Lord Simeon?" I said gingerly.

"Oh, I'm sorry." He finally came to his senses and pulled his hands away. Awkwardly, he asked, "Was that true? Were you really starving?"

"Well, I'd say that phrasing is slightly exaggerated. I was hungry, certainly. I forgot to eat lunch."

It was clear from his face that he understood now, but the knowledge only worried him further. "That must have been quite a struggle after the day of activity you've had."

"It slipped my mind, that's all. I should have asked for some of the food being served at the church, but I was always preoccupied with something else."

If I wasn't mistaken, his gaze turned to my pocket for a moment. *He noticed after all. Nothing gets past Lord Simeon.*

I took out the bag of sweets and held them out to him. "He gave these to me to see me through."

He shook his head and took my hand again. "I won't take them from you. Keep them."

I stared back at him.

"I'll admit I find it frustrating," he continued, "but it would be wrong for me to be so unreasonable. I wish I could give you something to eat myself, but I don't have anything."

His voice had faded to a sad murmur and he couldn't look me in the eye. *My word, he looks despondent. Lutin's comment must have hit him rather hard. He can be surprisingly sensitive about that sort of thing.*

I returned the bag to my pocket, then reached up and put my hands on his cheeks. "It's my mistake that I forgot to eat. I don't blame anyone else for it. Lutin happened to notice and was kind enough to help, but that's no reason for

you to feel inferior, surely.”

“A husband has a responsibility to take care of his wife. You were suffering, and I was elsewhere, having not even noticed.”

“You say that as if something truly serious had happened. I was a little hungry, nothing more. You needn’t pull a grim face like that! Now that I think about it, you must be hungry as well by now. Is that why you’re so miserable?”

“Miserable. Yes, I suppose that describes it.”

We each heaved a heavy sigh. Hunger can sap people of their spirits. I knew this all too well, even if I’d never expected to see it from Lord Simeon.

“I do hope dinner’s ready soon.”

“I quite agree,” he replied.

Immediately following our sad moment of mutual grumbling, a knock came at the door. When I responded, a maid entered with a tray in her hands. “I’m so sorry that we can’t manage more than this, but please, you’re absolutely welcome to it.”

To my delight, the tray held ham sandwiches and coffee just like those the daughter-in-law had been eating, with cookies on the side as well. It was like a guardian angel had been looking down on our pathetic situation.

“Thank you! Oh, thank you!”

“That’s quite all right. I can only apologize that our young mistress was so unkind.” She wore a strained smile as she placed the tray on the table. I realized she had been in the kitchen. “Ordinarily she’s not so bad, but she’s at the end of her tether today.”

“I can’t blame her given the circumstances.”

The coffee smelled wonderful. Milk and sugar had been provided as well. After the maid left, apologizing one more time, I offered the coffee to Lord Simeon.

“Go on, before it gets cold. You can drink some first.”

“It’s all meant for you, isn’t it? You should have it.”

“Why don’t we each have half of everything?” I giggled. “What a delightfully romantic idea. I think it will only make it taste more delicious.”

With a nervous grunt, he looked away again, putting a hand to his mouth. This was how he behaved when he was feeling bashful and shy. *Is it so embarrassing to share with me?*

I pulled out a chair and ushered him into it.

“In that case,” he replied at last, “you should drink first. I’ll have what’s left.”

“I can only drink coffee if I add lots of milk and sugar. You prefer it black, don’t you? That’s why it’s better for you to start.”

Reluctantly, he lifted the cup to his lips. “Very well, then.”

Despite my intentions, he drank little more than a sip before returning the cup to me.

There were two sandwiches, so we had one each. While savoring mine, I recalled a favor I wanted to ask him. “Oh yes, that’s right! When we’ve finished, I’d like to get changed. Would you mind helping me?”

Lord Simeon almost choked on the food he’d just put in his mouth. In a panic, I thrust the coffee cup at him; he obediently drank some to wash it down, screwing up his face at the sweetness.

“What a thing to suggest,” he said once he’d calmed down. “It’s improper for a man to help dress a woman.”

“The maids are all rushed off their feet, so I don’t want to distract them. I wouldn’t ask any other gentleman, of course, but surely it’s acceptable for my husband to help?”

“I don’t believe so, no,” he muttered uneasily.

“You’ve stripped me of my clothes before. How can it be any worse for you to dress me?”

“I’ll call back the maid who was here a moment ago.”

He stood, about to go to the door, but I firmly grabbed him to pull him back. “She’s busy getting dinner ready. I saw her peeling a veritable mountain of

potatoes. We mustn't trouble her any further."

"Then you should wait until my mother returns."

"Why are you being so difficult? You're eager enough when it comes to removing my clothes for other reasons. Does the thought of putting them back on me bother you so much?"

"Yes, it bothers me! Or rather, those aren't comparable situations! Even if we are husband and wife, there are lines we mustn't cross."

"You've certainly made your feelings plain."

He paused for a moment. "You always make sure to leave the room when I'm getting changed, do you not? It's basic manners, or accepted practice, perhaps. I'd prefer you not to be the sort of woman who feels no embarrassment in changing her clothes in front of the opposite sex, even if the man in question is her husband."

Pouting, I fell silent. That much went without saying; I obviously didn't want to be a woman he thought of as disgraceful. Ordinarily I would never ask such a thing, but couldn't he accept that there were extenuating circumstances?

Hanging my head, I replied, "Don't you think it's far more shameful for me to still be in this muddy dress? I hate having to walk around the manor like this. Lord and Lady Lespinasse's daughter-in-law even made a comment about it. It's unsanitary—I'm getting mud all over the place."

He silently looked down toward my feet. I'd changed my shoes, but the hem of my dress was still caked in dirt. I had scrubbed and beaten it as hard as I could before coming inside the manor, getting as much off as I could, but there was only so much I could do. My dress was filthy, just as the young lady had said.

"There's nothing shameful about it. It's proof that you worked hard for the benefit of the townspeople and Prince Gracius. For a noblewoman to devote herself so thoroughly to such a cause is entirely commendable, in fact. I'm proud to be married to someone who would think nothing of ruining a dress if it let you help others."

His warm hand brushed my cheek. I looked up and was met by a kind gaze

from his light blue eyes.

“That sounds like a neat and tidy conclusion, but are you going to help me with my clothes or not?”

The breath caught in his throat. Even now, my husband was putting up resistance.

“I’m embarrassed,” he murmured.

“I’m the one who should be embarrassed! I put my shame aside to ask you, so I’d rather you didn’t shy away like an innocent maiden!”

“What are you two arguing about?”

We turned to see a face peering in from the doorway. Lord Noel wore a mock-exasperated expression.

“I came to tell you Mother and Father are back, but it looks like I’m interrupting. What’s this you’re talking about that’s so embarrassing? Honestly, I don’t think you have time for *that sort of thing* right now. Besides, you’re guests in someone else’s home.”

“What do you mean?” A moment later, I realized *exactly* what he meant and felt my face flush bright red. “No! No, no, that’s not what we were talking about!”

“Are you self-conscious that you’re not expecting yet? You only just got married, so you don’t need to worry so much. Plus, after you have a baby, you’ll be completely obsessed with it to the exclusion of all else. I’m sure Simeon will be jealous. Better for you to enjoy your newlywed life for a while first, don’t you think?”

“That’s not what it was about! It’s not!”

I knew he was only teasing me, but I fervently denied it nonetheless. Sighing, Lord Simeon stood up. His brother tried to run, but Lord Simeon grabbed him before he could and struck him with his fist.

While we were talking, the corridors outside had come to life. The lord and his wife had returned along with all the servants who had left that morning, which meant I could ultimately find one to help me get changed without any

problem.

As an aside, Lady Lespinasse later scolded her daughter-in-law for her behavior.

Chapter Nine

When morning came, it felt like I'd woken from a very long dream. Yesterday had been so packed full of activity that I'd barely had time to rest, but now the manor was in a state of calm. Even the sound of rainfall was gone. I was left with a restless feeling, as though I was surely supposed to be doing something.

The church and the manor were both still under guard, of course. However, finding and safely retrieving Prince Gracius had been a significant step. Now that there was no need to race about searching for him, Lord Simeon's workload was greatly reduced.

The town was starting to return to normality as well. With the rain gone, every so often the clouds even parted and the sun shone through. The rivers receded and the evacuees at the church returned to their homes. Repairing and cleaning up their water-damaged houses would be a lot of work, but the townspeople seemed ready and willing to help one another and get through it together.

After breakfast, I went to check on Prince Gracius. He was out of bed now and was sitting by the window, gazing out.

"Good morning. How are you feeling today?"

When he heard my voice, he turned to look with a placid gaze. "Oh, Marielle, it's you. Morning."

He looked a lot more princely today, dressed in the fine clothes he'd been wearing originally when he ran from the attack. Now that he'd had enough sleep, the dark circles under his eyes had faded as well. His dashing clothes and refreshed face gave him a very different air. Now, one glance was enough to know that he was a nobleman through and through.

At his invitation, I sat down across from him. This was the room that Lord Noel had given up for His Highness and Lord Simeon to sleep in; in order to vacate it for Prince Gracius, Prince Severin had returned to the room occupied

by the knights. The latter were doing guard duty in shifts, so the room wasn't as crowded as before, but I was still impressed that a prince could accept such conditions without complaint. It did him credit.

"Do you still feel unwell at all? Did you eat breakfast?"

"Yes, I ate, and I'm feeling much better. My head doesn't hurt as much as it did."

"That's good to hear. You should still avoid any excess activity, though. A concussion is nothing to sneeze at. According to the doctor, you need to rest for about ten days so your progress can be monitored."

A wry smile flashed across his face. "Don't worry. I can't go anywhere anyway. I don't remember how I got here, and I have no idea what to do next. Should I go along with being taken to Sans-Terre, as Prince Severin says? It sounds like yet more confinement."

Resignation appeared in his eyes. He looked away from me, turning back to the window and staring out at the landscape. In his gaze I could sense a longing for freedom.

"Is that how you were treated in Linden?"

He didn't deny it. Resting his chin in his hands, he replied, "I doubt anyone else saw it that way. My aunt doted on me, and my uncle and cousins were all kind to me. I wanted for nothing, and I was given a great education as well. You could call it a charmed life. All of it was borrowed, though. I was a refugee forced to leave my own country with nowhere else to go, and they were letting me leech off them. Nothing more."

"That can't be how they think of you."

"There was a hefty price to pay for my room and board, too. My life was constantly under threat, so I was never left by myself under any circumstance. I rarely left the palace, and I had guards buzzing around me even while walking around the gardens."

I paused for thought, then said, "I can imagine that felt very restrictive, but I'm sure it's because you're precious to them, Lord Lucio."

“‘Precious.’ Do you know the meaning of that word?”

“Well, I...”

When I faltered, he let out a sigh mixed with a chuckle. I had the sense he was laughing not at me, but at himself. “The reason why I was so carefully protected, and why the enemy was so eager to kill me—it was purely because of the value I hold. If I became the king of Orta, it would be very convenient for some and very inconvenient for others.”

I listened without a word.

“I can’t remember my home or my parents. I have no knowledge of my roots or what kind of man I’m supposed to be. I don’t know where to go, or even what direction to face. And yet, despite being such a worthless person, I’m extremely important to everyone else. They fight with all they have to save me or murder me. Isn’t it absurd?”

It didn’t seem right to interrupt him. I doubted he was telling me all this with any expectation that I could help, anyway. He continued in such a gentle tone that it was as if the truculent persona from when we’d first met had been an illusion.

“Even though I don’t remember running away on my own, I’m pretty sure I know exactly why I did it. It had all gotten to be too much for me, so I just ran like the wind, not even thinking about the consequences. Call me irresponsible if you want. I’d agree with you. But sometimes I just can’t bear it anymore.”

I knew his situation was complicated, but I suddenly felt keenly aware that I hadn’t thought in any detail about how it would feel. Like everyone else, I’d been less concerned with his feelings and more with the circumstances surrounding him. If everyone treated him that way all the time, seeing him more for what he represented than who he was, it was only natural that he’d grow sick of it.

Is that entirely true though? Is there really not a single person who truly cares about him for himself?

I didn’t want to speak out of turn when I knew so little about his life. However, he seemed to be an honest person who wore his heart on his sleeve. I

couldn't imagine anyone turning out like that if they hadn't been raised with love and affection.

"Yesterday, when the Silver Fox asked you where the crown was, you said, 'I've wanted to get rid of it for years.'"

My words prompted him to look up and turn his head toward me.

"Now I know," I continued. "Those really are your true feelings."

He didn't respond.

"Only, if that's true, why take the crown with you when you escaped?"

"I don't understand."

I smiled, trying to maintain as cheerful a demeanor as possible. "If you were trying to run away from the burdens forced upon you, it seems strange that you held onto the emblem of all that. Isn't that the one thing you'd most want to get away from?"

He appeared to ponder this.

"You could have just left it behind, but you went out of your way to keep it," I continued. "I can't help wondering why. Even if you don't remember, I imagine you have some idea."

He wore a searching expression as he thought about the actions he'd taken but didn't recall. In the moment, he probably hadn't been conscious of exactly why he was doing it anyway, but I didn't expect it would be too hard to look inside himself and think of the reason.

"You said something else to the Silver Fox. 'I had to make sure it didn't fall into your hands.' I don't think you're irresponsible at all, Lord Lucio. You're human, and like anyone else, having too much responsibility thrust into your hands can't be easy. It's normal to want to run away sometimes, all the more so if it's a matter stemming from your birth that you had no control over whatsoever. It's an entirely natural reaction. I wouldn't call you irresponsible just because of that."

"Marielle, I..."

"I think it might help if you tell Prince Severin all this as well. At first glance he

may look like a man brimming with confidence and without even a modicum of self-doubt, but he actually worries about the tiniest things, and starts grumbling and getting upset at the drop of a hat. He's often taking his anger out on me or muttering about trivial complaints."

Prince Gracius's face said he struggled to believe me. "Really? He behaves like that?"

I replied with a nod. "All the time. He's been hugely kind and helpful to me as well, though. That's why I think you should tell him. No one else would be able to put themselves in your shoes the way he would. He wouldn't disregard and mock your point of view without even considering it. Of course, he has to prioritize his position as crown prince of Lagrange, but he'd also listen properly and keep your feelings in mind. That's the man he is."

Despite my assurances, Prince Gracius's expression was still halfway between belief and doubt. I could understand his uncertainty as to whether anyone could really understand and empathize with his situation. Prince Severin wouldn't necessarily have the perfect answer at the ready, and I wasn't trying to promise that.

"If you don't know where to go, maybe it's best to choose the direction that looks the most promising. Just start walking, with no hesitation, and see where it leads. Before too long, the right path will appear before you."

He hesitated. "Do you think so?"

"At the very least, cowering in place won't get you anywhere. That much is certain. If you don't want to stay where you are, you have to start heading somewhere else."

I felt that what he needed right now was an impetus to take the first steps—to start his journey, rather than being too afraid of pitfalls and obstacles along the way to even begin. If he did that, he was sure to find his path. He just needed a push, and discussing it with others could provide that.

"After you've walked for a while, you can look back on how far you've come on your own two feet, and that gives you the energy to keep going. Along the journey, you'll realize that enjoying life is the way to live it to its fullest."

The clouds parted in exactly the right location for a ray of sunlight to shine toward us. I stood and opened the window, letting fresh air into the room. The cool breeze still carried a hint of dampness, but also a lively, refreshing morning ambience.

Birds were singing. Small creatures were darting about on the boughs of trees nearby. Squirrels were gathering nuts as provisions for the winter. Looking out farther, larger animals could be seen in the distant fields. They were probably deer who had come down from the mountains and were proudly showing themselves to the townspeople.

Even after the flooding and landslides caused by the heavy rain, nature was still beautiful. Above the somewhat desolate landscape, thick clouds drifted on the wind.

Leaning against the window frame, I turned to face him again. "People can have very different ways of looking at the world. Even the same circumstances can be looked at in a completely different light. You don't need to change your outlook to suit other people's wishes, Lord Lucio. Instead, perhaps you can find a way to enjoy your situation."

"Enjoy it? How?"

"Rather than becoming king because it's what someone told you to do, wouldn't it be more enjoyable to decide on it yourself? Let's say you do become king. If you're doing it because you'll enjoy it, rather than because it's your responsibility or obligation, you'll find more joy in it. I'm not advocating for you to become a tyrannical ruler, of course! I simply mean that finding a worthwhile endeavor brings satisfaction in life."

He appeared a tad dubious.

"Look inside yourself, discuss it with others, and think it over properly. You shouldn't become king purely to suit other people's convenience. There are all sorts of facets to it, so even if you do ascend the throne, you can see it in an entirely different light if you have the right perspective. Maybe first you could try and find a way of looking at it that you can accept."

A knock came at the door. One of the knights standing guard went to answer it.

“If, after thinking about it properly, your conclusion is that you truly don’t want to be king, that’s not a problem. Then we’ll have to think of alternatives that don’t involve you sitting on the throne.”

The door opened to reveal Lord Simeon. Noticing that we were mid-conversation, he entered quietly to avoid disturbing us.

“They’ll never let that happen,” the prince replied. “The only way I don’t become king is if I die.”

“We don’t know that until we try. We might find an unexpected solution. For one thing, there are plenty of other blood relatives.”

Although Lord Simeon didn’t approach, his gaze was intense. I knew what I’d just suggested wasn’t really appropriate, so his glare prompted me to add an addendum in a hurry.

“I don’t mean to overstep my bounds, of course. I’m in no position to comment on that.”

Still, given that we’ve already discussed the possible next steps if something should happen to Prince Gracius, I doubt either my husband or His Highness will be so strongly against it that they won’t even consider other options.

Feeling the weight of Lord Simeon’s stare, I gathered my thoughts and offered a final summary of my point. “Lord Lucio, if you really look inside yourself and decide what it is you want, I’ll support it, whatever it may be. I’m eager for you to find the path that’s right for you.”

I beckoned to Lord Simeon, at which point he finally walked over to us. “I’m sorry to bother you while you’re relaxing,” he said to the prince. “I have a few questions to ask. Do you mind?”

“No,” Prince Gracius replied after a pause. “What is it?”

“It’s regarding the Holy Crown of Lorencio. I understand you’ve lost your memory, but I’d like to find out whether you’ve remembered any small details or have any guesses as to where you might have hidden it.”

Upon hearing this, the prince hung his head. *It would have been better if Alain could ask these questions rather than Lord Simeon. Even when he puts in extra*

effort to ask kindly and gently, my husband can be strangely intimidating in these situations. Still, with so few people here who speak Lindenese, there isn't really another choice.

"The smallest detail would be enough. All we need is some sort of clue."

Prince Gracius shook his head, his eyes still cast downward. "Sorry." It was clear that not only could he not remember anything, he didn't particularly want to answer either.

A soft sigh came from Lord Simeon's lips. I found myself wanting to do the same. *That's the other problem, isn't it? Unless we find the crown, there definitely won't be any king of Orta. It's essential for inheriting the throne. Also, the Silver Fox won't give up easily, so if we don't recover it soon, the priest and everyone else at the church is in danger.*

I'd been told that Lutin was currently investigating the church and its surroundings. He could look at the scene from a different perspective than the knights, so there was some hope that he might happen upon something useful. Trying to maintain my optimism, I gazed out of the window again.

When he had fled after the attack in Chanmery, it had taken two days for the prince to reach this town. It was possible he'd hidden it along the way, but the chances of that seemed remote. Knowing how important an item it was, he wouldn't have left it somewhere he couldn't quickly get back to. Even if he had wanted to get rid of it, he'd kept it with him, which meant he had probably seen it as more than just a heavy burden. No doubt it was also a precious treasure to him—a link to the homeland and parents he could no longer remember. This meant the hiding place would surely be somewhere close by that he could keep watch over.

Maybe it really is at the church.

I looked along the road leading away from the manor, only to see some people drawing closer. Dozens of men on horseback were racing along the straight path at a breakneck pace.

"Lord Simeon, look!"

He did so, but replied, "They must be Prince Gracius's attendants. Nothing to

worry about.”

“What attendants?”

“The escort he left behind in Chanmery. A messenger was dispatched to them yesterday, so they must have ridden through the night.”

Hearing his own name, Prince Gracius looked at us. Lord Simeon switched back to Lindenese and explained what he’d just said to me.

He was proven correct. The new arrivals were soon led to the room, and the head of the party, a bespectacled man of around thirty, burst through the door.

“Your Highness!” He ran over to Prince Gracius’s side so quickly that he almost tripped. “Thank goodness! Oh, thank goodness you’re all right!” The man struggled to form any more words through his tears.

“Isaac, you’re here,” the prince began, a mixture of guilt and relief on his face.

This must be someone who served him very closely in Linden. Now that I recall, “Isaac” was also the first name out of his mouth when he woke up yesterday evening. Perhaps he’s a trusted confidant in the way Lord Simeon is for Prince Severin. I can understand why he’d feel guilty over abandoning someone like that, even if he didn’t remember doing it.

The men who followed Isaac into the room were Lagrangian military officers. Their muted green uniforms marked them as members of the army. They exchanged salutes with Lord Simeon, who then left the room, ushering me along with him.

Side by side, we walked along the corridor. As usual, there were no servants anywhere in sight on the second floor. *Now there are even more people in the manor. The place is full to bursting already. I wonder what they’ll do.*

“That Isaac fellow doesn’t appear to be Lindenese,” I observed. “He has an onyx earring in his left ear. That means he comes from the same specific region of Orta as the Silver Fox.”

“Ah yes, it was the custom of a particular clan, wasn’t it? They’re not all known for illicit undercover work, I’m sure.”

“No, they should mostly be normal people—in theory, at least. The word

‘clan’ doesn’t do justice to how many there are. It would be impossible for all of them to be assassins and operatives.”

“I’ll keep this detail in mind, but I doubt it’s anything to worry about. He was the only member of the escort that came from Linden, and I’m told he’s served the royal family ever since its exile. Otherwise, the Lagrangian army took over as his guards. There’d have been no opportunity for a spy to enter the midst.”

His confident reply was reassuring. For someone so close to the prince to have been an enemy all along was a plot twist I could do without. However, even if there were perfectly good reasons, it was sad to imagine the prince having to leave behind everyone he knew in Linden except this one man.

When we were quite far from Prince Gracius’s room, Lord Simeon stopped and changed his tone to a reproachful one. “More importantly, Marielle, what were you telling the prince just now? You mustn’t start giving him strange ideas.”

I hesitated before replying. “I know I went slightly too far at the end, but I don’t think there was anything wrong with the general premise.”

“Marielle,” he said sharply, his eyes narrowing.

This time I steeled myself and replied in a more determined tone. “Lord Lucio is a person with feelings like any other. Regardless of the position he was born into, he experiences sadness and pain. Circumstances were moving around him without any regard for his will, and in reaction to that, he ran away. Telling a man like that simply to work hard and do his duty will only push him away even further.”

“How well do you even know him? You’ve been involved with him for a single day. Allying yourself with him so quickly is a mistake. You’re interfering in business that doesn’t concern you.”

I bit my lip. I didn’t think Lord Simeon was wrong as such. On an objective level, I could certainly see his point. Still, I couldn’t stand being set upon like this. “Exactly. I’m a complete stranger to him. As someone who only entered his life by pure happenstance, I have no right to comment. And yet, Lord Lucio is suffering so much that he was willing to share his feelings with a stranger like me. All I did was offer some advice in the hope that it might lighten his burden

even slightly.”

“In moments like those, you should pay no mind. The correct approach would have been to let him say what he wanted, then keep what he said entirely to yourself.”

“‘Correct,’ maybe, but unspeakably cold!”

“Honestly, Marielle!”

I turned, about to leave, but he grabbed my arm and pulled me back.

With a bitter undertone in my voice, I said, “You needn’t worry, I won’t go anywhere near Lord Lucio ever again. He has his closest aide now, who I’m sure can take care of both interpreting and being a discussion partner. I’m relieved of duty, so you may be reassured that I won’t fill his head with any more strange ideas.”

Now Lord Simeon bit his lip. “You shouldn’t call him by his given name,” he said after a pause. “It’s overfamiliar and disrespectful.”

My word, it’s one thing after another! But I forced myself not to state this aloud. I was growing too emotional and didn’t want this to grow into a full-blown argument. Telling myself to remain composed, I replied, “My apologies. He requested it because he didn’t like being treated with such a high level of formality. However, I realize I should call him Prince Gracius around others. I’ll be more careful.”

“I didn’t realize you and he...”

When he trailed off, I replied with a “Hmm?” However, he only turned his head away and let go of my arm.

An uncomfortable silence filled the air. I couldn’t understand why there had been such sudden hostility between us. It didn’t seem like a subject worth quarreling over.

Maybe I really was in the wrong. It wasn’t my business to interfere. But still, surely it’s not so awful to try to soothe him a little bit. If someone is right in front of me making it clear with their words and their body language that they’re suffering, I can’t be cruel enough to ignore it. Is it wrong to see it that way?

*Sometimes people just want to be consoled even if it doesn't actually help.
Perhaps Lord Simeon's so perfect that he's simply never had that experience.*

As we stood there, I suddenly heard footsteps coming from the staircase.

"Go back to your room," said Lord Simeon, leaving me behind and heading back to the room where His Highness was waiting.

One of the people who had come up the stairs spoke to me. "Is something the matter?"

I turned and saw Countess Estelle and Earl Maximilian standing there. Putting a smile on my face, I said, "No, not at all. I just came back from saying hello." I pointed toward Prince Gracius's room. Right now, I couldn't bring myself to vent my worries to my mother-in-law as usual.

She replied, "His retinue has arrived, hasn't it?"

"Yes. I didn't want to get in the way, so I left."

"That sounds very wise. Actually, we've been thinking about making a move soon ourselves. Could you start packing? We'll probably leave shortly."

This came as a surprise. "You mean to go home today?"

"If possible, yes."

She and I both looked over at her husband, who nodded. "Some of the locals have been inspecting the condition of the road, and they informed us that it should be safe. To really be extra careful it would be better to wait a few days and see, but we don't want to keep imposing on House Lespinasse when they're already under so much strain."

"That makes sense."

"I can't stay away from the university for too long either. I don't have only my research to worry about, but lectures to lead as well. What about you, Marielle? Would you prefer to stay here?"

It was very kind of Earl Maximilian to ask. Naturally, I was worried about how events would unfold and wished I could see them to the end, but overall, I couldn't justify staying any longer. What I'd blurted out at Lord Simeon a moment ago had been true, after all. My assistance wasn't really needed

anymore.

“No, I’ll come with you.”

I returned to my room and started organizing my things, as Countess Estelle had instructed. I didn’t really want to leave Lord Simeon when there was discord between us, but in the end, he was busy working. He couldn’t spend time on personal matters. There’d be time for us to talk properly later, when everything had calmed down, by which point both of us would hopefully have cooler heads.

Feeling my mood sinking, I consciously shook off my melancholy and focused on packing. Somehow I couldn’t fit everything into my suitcases even though I had exactly the same amount of things as I’d brought with me. Fortunately, a maid came and helped me. It was the same one who had brought the refreshments the evening before; she had apparently heard that I was leaving and wrapped up some biscuits for me to eat on the carriage ride home.

“Thank you very much,” I said. “Everyone here has been so kind and helpful. I’m sorry that we caused so much extra fuss when we only came here to attend the funeral.”

“Not at all. We’re grateful that you and your mother lent your aid to the townspeople. You’re from such a distinguished noble house, so everyone was surprised that you got your hands dirty.”

“It was Lady Lespinasse who took the initiative. All we did was follow her lead. Incidentally, I’m not the countess’s daughter, I’m her daughter-in-law. I’m married to her son.” I showed her my ring to underline this.

The maid laughed and apologized. “I’m so sorry. I heard the young mistress mention it, but she had it all wrong, evidently. You also don’t quite come across as a woman who’s already married. You seem so young and sweet.”

Oh no, she sees me as a child too.

I groaned. “Do I really seem that much like a child?”

“If you do, what’s wrong with that? Soon enough, you’ll start aging and wish you could turn back the clock. Having children has an effect on your body. That’s what my older sister is going through.”

The topic of children had come up again. So far, there was still no sign of that on the horizon. I wondered when I would be blessed. I'd only been married for about four months, so perhaps I was getting ahead of myself, but I really wanted to give Lord Simeon a child.

A boy would be best if possible. Countess Estelle says that she's sick of boys after raising three of them, so she'd rather I have a girl first, but I'm sure deep down she wants a grandson who can be her heir. She just doesn't want me to feel any undue pressure.

When will Lord Simeon and I get to meet our child? Hopefully it won't be too long once we've made up again.

Thanks to the maid's help, I was able to finish packing without too much trouble in the end. We weren't setting out right away, so I decided to go and say goodbye to the priest before leaving. *After what His Highness had said yesterday, I'll have to be careful not to bring up too many details, but surely there's nothing wrong with a quick goodbye? If I go to the grave one last time and visit him while doing so, no one would think anything of it.*

I excused myself, telling my mother-and father-in-law that I was off to visit the church, then stepped outside. The sky was still full of clouds, and the wind was as strong as ever. The sun made fleeting appearances before hiding away again. I hoped we'd see a clear autumn sky before too long.

When I left the manor and started walking along the road toward the town, a person suddenly appeared beside me. Despite his large body, he'd sneaked up without a sound. I jumped back in shock—but when I looked up at his face, the tension left me. “Oh, Dario. I didn't know you were around.”

Looking down at me was a very tall man, even taller than Lord Simeon, with muscles so spectacular they hardly seemed real. With his head of elegant golden curls, he nodded expressionlessly.

This was Lutin's right-hand man, Dario. I knew that if Lutin was here, Dario couldn't be far behind. Despite being such a giant, he could suppress his presence so completely that I didn't even notice—but where on earth had he been hiding?

“Can I help you with something?”

He silently shook his head.

“No? Hmm. Do you want to go with me? Do you need something in the town?”

When he shook his head again, I took my notebook and pen out of my pocket.

“Can you write? It doesn’t matter if it’s in Lavian, I can still understand it.”

I held out the stationery. He stared down at it for a moment, then took both items without a word. The notebook was a petite one that I could take out and about with me. He awkwardly opened it and wrote something down. The pen looked like a matchstick in his huge hand.

He returned the notebook and pen. “Thank you,” I said. “Let’s see...”

Written on the page in clumsy handwriting were the words “Not safe alone” in Lavian.

“I see. You’ve come to escort me. Thank you.”

He curled his arms to show off his biceps, his muscles bulging so hard that they threatened to burst through the fabric of his shirt sleeves. I clapped in appreciation.

His unusual size and generally impassive face made him seem imposing, but once you got to know him, he actually had a very sweet personality. He was exceptionally proud of his muscles, and being praised for them made his cheeks flush with happiness.

Had Lutin ordered him to keep an eye on me? Being told that it wasn’t safe to be on my own immediately made me think about the Silver Fox. Was it possible that he might target me, I wondered?

I know he holds a grudge against me after the incident on Enciel Island, but surely he wouldn’t focus his attention on me right now. His attempt to assassinate Prince Gracius has been thwarted, and even searching for the crown will be difficult with the knights keeping such a close watch. He and his men are in rather a bind.

It occurred to me that he might thus decide to take me hostage and make demands, but it didn’t seem likely. *I can’t rule out the possibility entirely, but he*

surely couldn't expect anything but a breakdown in negotiations. Prince Severin knows his priorities and would stick to them. Even if it weren't me that was taken hostage, but his fiancée, Julianne, his response would be the same. His Highness wouldn't let personal feelings get in the way.

I couldn't imagine the Silver Fox going to all that effort right now if he'd have nothing to show for it. Still, I was grateful for the concern in sending Dario. I gladly made my way to the church with him by my side.

While walking along the tranquil country road, I chattered away about whatever popped into my head. Passing villagers who saw Dario stared with eyes as big as saucers.

Dario responded to my one-sided conversation with the occasional nod. I'd thought he was just the silent type, but it seemed he actually couldn't talk. Either way, it was clear that he understood me with no issues, even though I was speaking Lagrangian.

Once we were close to the church, I suddenly sensed a frantic atmosphere, with knights rushing in and out. Worried that something awful might have happened again, I quickened my pace, but then Dario put a large hand on my shoulder, pulling me back and shaking his head.

Just as I was wondering what could be going on, Alain came out of the church. "Bring word to the manor!" he cried to one of the men, who sped off along the road.

Alain's expression was one of elation, as were those of the knights. Whatever had happened, it wasn't something bad.

Relieved, I went up to him. "Alain, what's going on?"

When he turned to face me, I saw he was cradling something close to his chest. It was covered in a cloth and small enough that a man could hold it in one hand.

My heart skipped a beat when I realized what it might be.

Alain saw the look on my face and knew what I was thinking. He gave a hearty nod as a smile spread across his whole face.

“We found it!”

Chapter Ten

In stark contrast to the last time I'd seen it, the church was deathly silent. Still, signs that it had been used as an emergency shelter were obvious everywhere I turned. The floor was still muddy, having not been cleaned yet, but there were fresh footprints all over the place as well. They presumably belonged to Alain and his fellow royal guards, who had been searching high and low for the crown.

I made my way to the altar at the far end of the room. This was a meager country church, so it lacked any elaborate ornamentation or engraving, but it had all the necessary accoutrements. The wall beneath the altar had a compartment for storing implements that were not often needed. The Holy Crown of Lorencio had been found buried in there.

"We almost overlooked it completely," Alain had explained with a great deal of excitement. "It didn't stand out, since it looked like it belonged there with the other ceremonial items. It makes sense now that I think about it. It was hidden in plain sight—simple but effective."

Alain had brought the crown to the manor, clutching it tightly and surrounded closely by an escort of his comrades, and the locals who had come to stare had dispersed. Now I stood in the empty church with only Dario for company and looked for the compartment.

Inconspicuous though it was, I managed to find the small door. *So this is where it was hidden.* The knights had searched as scrupulously as they could, but they couldn't be too thorough inside the church itself. Not when there was a risk of Ortan operatives lurking among the evacuees; with such a large number of people, it wasn't possible to individually identify everybody. As such, it wasn't too surprising that it hadn't been found until today. *Still, something seems odd.*

Footsteps echoed behind me. Dario responded before I did; when I noticed him tensing up beside me, I turned and saw a slender man standing there.

The breath caught in my throat and I drew backwards. After his retreat the day before, the Silver Fox had revealed himself again, openly and without even hiding his face.

Dario stepped in front of me. His sturdy figure blocked my vision, and no doubt I was hidden from the Silver Fox as well.

I could hear his voice, though. He snorted.

“Another burly protector. I had no idea House Flaubert kept a man like this in its employ. Most impressive.”

He doesn't know that they're in the same line of work. It seems he's not aware that the Lavian spies are cooperating with Lagrangian royal guards on this mission.

“I suppose it's expected that your husband would send a faithful lapdog to protect you. I'm left without recourse. How sad.”

He laughed as he spoke, so he didn't come across as especially sad. Wondering what he could possibly have come here for, I peeked out from behind Dario to look at the Silver Fox.

When we'd met on Enciel Island, his attire had given him the air of a well-dressed dandy, but here he was dressed rather more plainly. He could blend into his surroundings perfectly: fine clothes for a spectacular location, simple clothes for a small rural town. Thus, he was able to get close to people without them suspecting a thing—a terrifying trait of men like him.

He glanced at the altar. “I hear the Holy Crown of Lorencio has been located. The glorious knights are returning with their heads held high. It's hardly unexpected that it was hidden in the church, but I must ask: were you able to look at it yourself?”

I didn't respond. His implication was clear: he was skeptical that the crown had actually been found. However, rather than assuming too hastily that it was a ruse, he'd come to look for himself.

“Did that knight actually show you what he was holding?” he repeated.

“Of course not.” I felt a tad pathetic replying from behind Dario, but I had no

choice. “Why would he unveil something so precious at the side of the road? What I saw was something covered in cloth of about this size.”

I used my hands to demonstrate.

“Clearly you’re wondering if it’s some sort of deception,” I continued. “I can’t confirm either way, of course, since I haven’t seen it. However, what I can say for certain is that the knights have withdrawn from here.”

He fell silent, taking in my point. It was true—they had withdrawn completely, which they wouldn’t be able to do if they hadn’t actually found the crown yet. It would be too risky to leave the church without anyone standing watch if there was a chance the crown was still here. So they might not have confirmed that the crown was genuine yet, but they certainly *believed* it was.

There was another possibility, but I decided not to mention it. The Silver Fox seemed not to have realized it on his own, and I didn’t want to give it away.

“Indeed,” he replied. “They’ve all gone. They must have decided there’s no need for them here anymore.”

Despite agreeing with my words, his expression said he still harbored some doubt.

I didn’t want to say too much, so I simply waited and observed him. Dario didn’t move a muscle either, glaring intensely at the Silver Fox. Despite the fearsome adversary we were facing, the atmosphere was strangely calm.

We were interrupted by the sound of a door opening. An old man entered through a side door some distance from the entrance used by believers coming to worship. He was carrying a bucket, a broom, and other cleaning supplies.

Noticing us, he waved. “Oh, you’re the girl from the manor, aren’t you?” He smiled, creasing his wrinkled face even further.

It was one of the helpers at the church. His name was Mr. Ogier, I recalled. Evidently he’d come to clean the muddy floor.

“Thank you for all your help yesterday,” he added.

Then, paying no attention to the tension between us, he came closer. I suddenly became very nervous about what the Silver Fox might do. I doubted

he'd cause Mr. Ogier any harm, but I was still praying the man didn't come too close.

To prevent this, I walked over myself and met him halfway. "Good day," I replied, a tremor in my voice. "I know it was a busy day for you as well. You deserve far more credit than I do. Is the priest around?"

"Do you need him for something? I'm afraid he's gone out to do his daily visits to the sick and such. I don't think he'll be back until the afternoon, to be honest."

"Oh, really? Well, never mind. I just wanted to say hello, that's all."

For such an elderly man, he was quite encumbered, with a full bucket of water, a broom, a mop, and a cleaning cloth. I immediately reached out to help him, but he insisted he was fine. There was a smile in his blue eyes now that I saw them up close.

Oh. Oh!

More footsteps echoed. I whipped my head around and saw the Silver Fox walking toward the exit. He left without another word.

I breathed a sigh of relief as I watched him disappear into the distance. Then I heard a stifled laugh from beside me.

"You should go back to the manor," the old man whispered. "It's not safe outside with the big bad wolf around."

The voice sounded so youthful it could have belonged to a different person altogether. I glared at him, both impressed and somewhat annoyed. "Honestly! I thought you were the real Mr. Ogier."

"Having an outsider prowling around would look too suspicious. Our foes are well hidden, but they're nearby and always watching."

"Apparently so."

Even with the Silver Fox gone, Lutin didn't abandon his persona. He hunched his back and bowed his legs in the manner of an old man. His hands even appeared gnarled and bony, though I couldn't have said how he'd achieved the effect. As always, his disguise was magnificent. Only his eyes were the same as

ever, as blue as the ocean and glinting mischievously.

“If you’re still here, does that mean the crown—”

I tried to keep my voice as hushed as possible, but Lutin still silenced me before I completed my sentence. “Shh.” He put a finger to my lips and chided me with his eyes. I stopped talking and pushed his hand away.

“Ask the Vice Captain or the prince. Just as long as you go straight back. That man is looking for the slightest opening—and if he finds one, he’ll eagerly make you his target. You have a nature that draws bothersome men to you.”

I shrugged at his joke. “I can certainly believe that coming from you.” Then, returning to full voice, I said, “I’ll be off, then. Say hello to the priest for me.”

Though the audience had already left, I acted my role in this little play. Lutin got back into character as well. “You take care now, young lady,” he replied with the voice and face of an old man.

I left Lutin and the church behind and returned to the manor as quickly as possible, as I would have done without even being told. After thanking Dario, who saw me all the way to the front door, I rushed inside and up to the second floor, where I found Prince Severin having a conversation in the corridor. Across from him was Lord Simeon.

Reflexively, I almost ran over to him, but then I froze. The pair noticed and turned to look at me. I felt too awkward to go directly to Lord Simeon’s side when we hadn’t spoken since our argument. He, too, looked away uncomfortably.

After watching this, His Highness elbowed Lord Simeon, then beckoned me over with a finger. “I’m at the end of my tether with you two, I swear. One day it’s your irritating flirting, and the next you’re in a huff with each other! I’m sure this was some piffling lovers’ quarrel.”

“A lovers’ quarrel?”

I considered his words. *Is that all it was? Lord Simeon got annoyed with me, and I was less than thrilled about that. Both of us got a little too emotional.*

I stole a glance at my husband, who hesitantly returned my gaze. It was clear

in his eyes that he wasn't angry anymore—that he regretted the argument and wanted a chance to make up. However, his face also told me that he didn't feel able to apologize purely from his side.

Oh, I see. I know what this feels like.

“It's less like an argument between lovers and more like one between a parent and child.”

When I expressed this thought, the men before me both stared with suddenly wide eyes and reacted with a strange noise.

“A parent and child?!” said His Highness.

“It's exactly like the times I argued with my father. We didn't agree about something, so we had an argument about it, for better or worse. The way Lord Simeon looked afterwards reminds me exactly of my father.”

Lord Simeon staggered back, feebly supporting himself with a hand against the wall.

His Highness hurried to try and reassure him. “Wait, Simeon! Don't lose all hope just yet! She's only comparing the general situation, I'm sure! Though I admit I don't know what you argued about in particular.”

“It's true,” he murmured. “I'm just like a parent delivering endless annoying lectures.”

“You don't have to agree with her!” His Highness exclaimed.

“It's quite odd,” I added, “since my in-laws aren't as annoying at all.”

“And you! Stop making it worse!”

Leaning against the wall with both hands now, Lord Simeon stared at the floor. Seeing this sad sight, the remaining chagrin inside me melted away.

This wasn't something worthy of such grave concern. It was just an argument among family, nothing more. We were honest enough with each other that we didn't hold back, perhaps to an excessive degree. All he'd wanted to say was that it wasn't wise to get too deeply involved. I had my objections, of course, but seeing him so crestfallen over the whole matter made me feel that enough was enough. *Arguments between family members don't always have neat and*

tidy conclusions, and that's fine.

I walked over and nestled up against him, feeling him jump very slightly when I did so. I drew my cheek to his as well, so we could feel each other's warmth.

I apologized with my whole heart. "I'm sorry."

He didn't say a word, but I felt the tension release from his shoulders. I could feel his heartbeat, too, and it was the most precious thing in the world. He slowly turned and pulled me closer, into his chest.

If this had led to a kiss it would have been perfect, but His Highness interrupted in a deadpan tone. "You two believe you're the center of the universe, don't you? Now that you've reconciled blessedly quickly, can we please return to more serious matters?"

Lord Simeon hurriedly pulled his hands off me, while I turned sullenly to His Highness. "Our reunion was entirely serious, I'll have you know."

"Yes, quite," he replied with a sour look. "Perhaps you'll retain that serious spirit while listening to me now."

Sensing that now wasn't the time for further jesting remarks, I straightened up as well. "Is it about the crown being found?"

He nodded. "It is indeed. Let's discuss it in here." He turned and opened the door.

Lord Simeon called a nearby knight and put him on guard outside, then the three of us went into the room.

"I imagine you've guessed at the major details on your own," His Highness said as he sat down. They pulled the chairs close enough together that we could still hear each other even while speaking quietly. Lord Simeon also drew the curtain to guard against anyone peering in—even though we were on the second floor. This was a great deal of concern about security. My heart began to race. It was like something out of a story!

However, for what I was about to hear, I had to maintain a sober frame of mind. Resolutely putting my fangirl urges to one side, I asked, "I'm ninety percent certain at this point, but it's all a ruse, isn't it?"

His Highness nodded, readily admitting this with a hint of a smile. “Why ninety percent?”

“One can never be entirely certain about anything, but if the crown really had been found, I wouldn’t have expected Alain to behave that way.”

I had suspected he was deliberately putting on an act. The performance itself was not hammy by any means, but the script was rather odd. If the crown really had been found, there wouldn’t necessarily be a need to conceal that fact, but I didn’t think he’d have explained on the spot where it had been found in such precise detail. He had also spoken loudly to make sure everyone nearby heard. Knowing him, that seemed uncharacteristically rash.

I’d known straight away that it was probably an act intended for the Silver Fox and his men. The knights all withdrew from the church, leaving Lutin there alone. As long as *someone* was there keeping watch, all was well.

“You’ve claimed to have found it, though, and made sure everyone knows. What do you plan to do next?”

“We can’t keep Prince Gracius here forever now that he’s regrouped with his escort. He’ll be brought to Sans-Terre posthaste.”

His Highness announced this as though it were simply an item on an agenda. This suggested it had been decided without asking the man in question for his opinion. Even though this was more or less inevitable, it was sure to stoke Prince Gracius’s frustrations.

“Finding the crown is important as well, but our first priority is ensuring the prince himself is safely under guard at Ventvert Palace. It’s entirely likely that recuperating in a more comfortable environment will allow his memories to return in time. We also can’t rely on House Lespinasse’s graces forever, not least to prevent its members being caught in the crossfire.”

“That’s true.”

“It may sound sudden, but we intend to set off with him this afternoon. First we’ll travel to Sans-Ravel and stay overnight at the governor’s residence. We’ll have to move slowly due to the prince’s condition, but we should still arrive before sunset.”

Sans-Ravel was the Mauge region's main city, home to the government office, the police station, and other official facilities. This was where the priest had considered sending word after taking Prince Gracius into his care.

"If he reaches Sans-Ravel, it will be far more of a challenge for the Ortans to get to him. We should also be joined by reinforcements from the capital before too long. The concern is the road leading there."

His Highness folded his arms, looking rather troubled.

"It won't be easy for the Ortans to get at him then, either, since he'll have so many more men to guard him this time. Only, from what I'm told, the tactics they used in Chanmery were downright dirty. A covert operative is more than that term would suggest, after all. They don't always lurk in the darkness ready for a nice tidy sneak attack. They're fully capable of a frontal assault using firearms."

"Was there no way to prevent them from infiltrating the country to begin with?"

"That would be nice, but we can hardly build a wall along the entire border and keep it fully staffed. A land border can never be completely secure. The army is currently deployed along the border wherever practical, but a determined enough intruder could find a way to climb over the mountains. They must have split up into small groups and made their way past our forces."

It sounded like a story from a distant land that I'd read about in a newspaper, and yet the danger was quite real and happening right on my doorstep. Even if we weren't directly involved, we had sent reinforcements to Smerda, and that meant Lagrange was Orta's enemy in this war. If their forces could sneak in so easily, what was to stop them unleashing their full military might?

I fell silent for a moment, suddenly afraid. Then, Lord Simeon added to his liege's words. "Only a tiny number of people could enter the country in such a manner, however. This means they can't send an entire squadron, only a small group of operatives like the one we've seen. In turn, they can't move too openly. If they make a show of themselves, they'll be hunted down by our forces, which would be their own destruction. They can't do anything that would threaten Lagrange as a whole."

“Simeon’s quite right. The farther they get from the border, the harder it is for them to act. That’s precisely why it’s so likely that they’ll make their move while Prince Gracius is on the road to Sans-Ravel.”

“I see,” I replied. “It’s a mountainous region without any military or police facilities nearby.”

“Indeed.”

I more or less understood the situation. What still puzzled me was why they were telling me all this. Usually, they chased me away, telling me not to ask and not to involve myself. It could have been simply to prevent me from investigating on my own, but I sensed there was another reason.

I examined their faces. In contrast to His Highness, who looked calm, Lord Simeon showed signs of struggling to accept what had been decided. I had a strong suspicion of what this meant.

When I returned my gaze to His Highness, he confirmed it. “We’re telling you all this because we’d like your assistance. You can help us somewhat reduce the danger Prince Gracius is facing.”

“Really?”

“Absolutely,” His Highness answered in a reassuring tone. “Given the danger we’ve just discussed, I won’t force you. However, if you’re up to it, we’d greatly appreciate your help. You’ll be fully protected, of course. I promise you that.”

“If I can help, I definitely want to. Is Lord Simeon really comfortable with it, though?”

Both His Highness and I looked toward him, and he grimaced deeply. He would never readily accept my involvement in affairs that he knew would be dangerous.

If he says he cannot allow it no matter what, I wonder what I should do. It’s for the sake of protecting Prince Gracius, and it’s also an order from Prince Severin himself. As his subject and friend, I have ample reason to accept. Is it more proper for a wife to prioritize her husband’s wishes, however?

I reached out and put my hand on Lord Simeon’s. His light blue eyes looked

back at me. There was my husband, as strong, proud, and dignified as ever.
Please give an answer you can be proud of—that won't make you ashamed.

He closed his eyes and heaved a sigh. No matter how reluctant he was, there was only one answer he could give.

His large hands moved and encompassed mine. When he looked at me again, I nodded with a smile.

Chapter Eleven

The main road, which led from the residential area through farmlands and woods, ultimately narrowed into a mountain pass. Now, houses were very few and far between and there were forested hillsides as far as the eye could see.

We proceeded through the valley in two carriages driven in single file. The one in front held the two princes and Isaac, who was accompanying Prince Gracius. In the rear carriage sat me and my father-in-law. Surrounding both, never too far away, were guards on horseback.

Particular attention was given to the front carriage's security. Even the curtains were drawn tightly to deter snipers. In contrast, we were allowed far more leeway. We hadn't been told to close the curtains, and in fact, Earl Maximilian was gazing out of the window, his head resting in his hand.

The reason we two were traveling in the rear carriage alone was that Lord Noel had come down with a fever shortly before our departure. Countess Estelle had remained to take care of him, while his father and I had gone ahead. The earl had his duties at the university to worry about, and there was no reason for me to stay behind, so I had joined him.

That was the official explanation, at any rate. Prince Severin had come up with it.

"How are you feeling?" I asked the man sitting next to me. "The terrain will get more difficult after this, so if you'd like to stop a moment, the sooner the better." He was still recovering, so I was concerned for his health.

"I'm fine," came the reply after a moment's hesitation. His voice was youthful. He was wearing my father-in-law's clothes and hat and had been made up to look just like him, but underneath he was someone quite different. The real earl was still at the Lespinasse manor with his wife and youngest son.

It was clear that he was feeling pensive about something. "Are you upset that you're going to Sans-Terre?" I asked.

“No, not especially. It’s complicated, of course, but with all that’s been done for me, there’s only so much I can complain. I’m also thinking about the future, in my own way. What I’m worried about is the crown. I don’t like leaving it behind.”

An apprehensive look spread across the face of the man disguised as my father-in-law.

“They still haven’t found it. I tried to remember where I put it, but I just can’t.”

“Do you think it’s at the church?”

“It does seem the most likely place. It’s strange, but leaving it behind makes me incredibly uneasy. Imagine that when I hated it so much.”

He turned to me with a smirk. His blue eyes held far more determination than when I’d seen him that morning. “Maybe it’s just as you said. I’m starting to understand why I kept the crown with me when I ran.”

Looking at him now, I was beginning to feel I’d misunderstood him slightly. Despite his dislike of the heavy responsibility imposed upon him and the course of events he couldn’t escape from, he still had the will to carry on. When he had run away in Chanmery, it had probably been a temporary emotional outburst, not an indication that he meant to keep running forever.

“Don’t worry,” I assured him with a smile. “The church has been left under guard, so the enemy won’t be able to get close. That will also ensure the priest and his helpers aren’t put in any danger.”

He returned my smile and nodded.

It wasn’t clear to what extent the Silver Fox would be taken in by Prince Severin’s plan. The church couldn’t be defended forever, but it was too early to leave it vulnerable now, when Prince Gracius had only just left.

Traveling slowly, the journey to Sans-Terre would take roughly a day and a half. Since we’d left in the afternoon, that meant we could expect to arrive the following evening, although if the journey didn’t go as planned there was a chance we’d have to stay overnight somewhere. To reduce the risk to Prince Gracius as much as possible, His Highness had explained that it was best to use

a body double.

Riding in the other carriage was Lutin disguised as Prince Gracius. He'd left Dario to watch the church while he participated in this scheme. Lutin was the ideal man for the job, since he'd be able to inhabit the role perfectly. Even his eye color was similar. Isaac had actually been fooled at first.

"Dear oh dear," Lutin had said after being informed of the plan. "I'm used to being ordered around by Prince Liberto, but now I have another prince altogether telling me what to do."

Though he had grumbled, he did as His Highness asked, getting out all his disguise implements. I saw his selection of wigs; from those, he selected one that best matched Prince Gracius's hair color and skillfully cut and styled it.

"Do you always have all these on hand?" I asked him.

"Of course. If you ask me, the Silver Fox is a third-rate operative. He only changes his clothes and doesn't bother with anything else. Anyone can do that. The true art of disguise requires having the tools of the trade."

He took out some greasepaint and other kinds of makeup and applied it all. When he turned away from the mirror, his face was the spitting image of Prince Gracius.

I was so surprised and impressed that I was lost for words. Prince Gracius himself, standing beside me, was equally shocked. Next, Lutin worked his disguise magic on the prince, making him a perfect double of Lord Simeon's father.

"No need for a wig. Your hair color is similar enough that if you wear a hat that belongs to him, no one will know the difference."

The hat would also cover his distinctive forehead. With their similar body types, there was also no problem with borrowing the earl's clothes.

"Incredible," I remarked. "I'd love to see you disguise Lord Simeon as well."

"I certainly could if I wanted to, but I'd really rather not." Lutin snorted and exchanged a brief glare with Lord Simeon, who was watching from the sidelines.

Prince Gracius, who had been staring into the mirror, turned and said, "Your

work is very impressive, but are you really all right with this plan? If you're pretending to be me, that means your life is in danger."

The prince understood exactly why this plan was necessary, and it clearly left him feeling guilty. However, Lutin replied with a typically arrogant smile. "It's my job, after all. Don't forget that feeling, though. Lavia may not be sending reinforcements, but we're giving you a great deal of support nonetheless. We're more useful than that guard dog over there, I'd wager."

"Do you have to constantly talk like that?" I asked. "You'll put Lord Simeon in a murderous mood!"

Thus the two disguised men got into their separate carriages. Certain details were added for authenticity as well, such as Countess Estelle coming out to say goodbye before we departed, and Prince Gracius (actually Lutin) asking for the carriage to stop for a moment because he wasn't feeling well. There was no guarantee, but we hoped it was enough to deceive the Silver Fox.

My presence was also part of this whole production. It was to create the impression that the rear carriage belonged to House Flaubert. However clear that was made, though, there was still a danger to me, which was why Lord Simeon had been so reluctant. It didn't help that Prince Severin himself had a dangerous role in all this too. He'd insisted on riding in the front carriage even though his own life was also to be protected at all costs.

"You mustn't forget about recent events!" Lord Simeon had said, insistently trying to change His Highness's mind. "You were almost assassinated along with His Majesty. Although the reformist faction was responsible, it was masterminded by Orta. It's not only Prince Gracius they have in their sights, but you, too. You'll let them kill two birds with one stone!"

"That's exactly why I have to ride in the front carriage," His Highness had replied, his tone firm. "It would be highly unnatural for me to be in the rear carriage. It's better for the escort to be focused primarily in one place. Under any normal circumstances, Prince Gracius and I would ride together."

"Then we should use a body double for you as well."

"Can you suggest anyone else who would be able to replicate not only my appearance, but my mannerisms as well? You'd be no use at all, of course.

You're a military man through and through, and you act like it—and if they saw through you, the whole carefully laid plan would go up in smoke.”

Lord Simeon was too stubborn to yield. “I’d only need to be seen entering the carriage. They wouldn’t catch sight of me after that.”

His Highness, who had known his friend well for twenty years, didn’t back down either, working carefully to persuade him. “Calm down and think rationally. I’ll freely grant they’d love to assassinate me as well, but I’m hardly their top priority right now. Do you honestly think they have time to be focusing on me? They’ve already failed to take out Prince Gracius several times. What would be the use of getting me only to let him out of their grasp again?”

“But—”

“My death would also provoke Lagrange to take revenge. It would do less than nothing to improve Orta’s chances of winning the war, as I’m sure they’re well aware. I’m confident that Prince Gracius is the only one they give a fig about right now.”

Lord Simeon wore a troubled frown. Clapping him vigorously on the back, His Highness continued, “Besides, traveling in the rear is no guarantee of safety at all. Should I cower and hide while Marielle is brave enough to be part of the plan? Listen, our goal is to get to Sans-Terre safe and sound. On top of that, we have a plan to try and confuse the enemy as much as we can. Your goal is much the same. Don’t let the enemy get too close!”

Lord Simeon’s orders were to avoid overly prioritizing one or the other and ensure that both were fully protected and arrived without issue. In the end, he had finally nodded in acceptance.

Looking through the window now, the original escort team and the royal guards were working assiduously to keep guard. They were always sending a few people ahead to scout out the route. They kept up a rigorous rear guard as well, of course. The escort squadron held rifles along with the reins, while the royal guards had pistols equipped on the opposite side to their sabers. All these weapons, incidentally, were more advanced models than the Silver Fox and his men possessed. They were making it very obvious that if attacked, they’d be ready to respond in kind at a moment’s notice.

A thicket covered the road, giving us poor visibility. This would be a perfect hiding spot for foes to lie in wait, of course. The men on horseback appeared to be particularly tense, and Prince Gracius looked uneasy as well.

I felt the same way, but I wasn't overly tense. Leaving that to Lord Simeon, I spoke to the prince in an effort to distract him. "What does the Holy Crown of Lorencio look like? I've heard it's essential for ascending the throne, but I don't know much more about it. Is it an elaborate creation covered in all sorts of jewels?"

He shook his head. "It's nothing like that. I'm afraid you might be disappointed if you see it. The setting is made of gold, but its design is pretty simple. It's about this big, I suppose." He used his hands to show me. It was roughly the same size as the fake Alain had been holding. "There are some jewels, but not large ones. Some diamonds, pearls, and rubies, I suppose."

"Like this?"

I drew a sketch of the crown in my notebook, but it ended up slightly distorted due to the shaking of the carriage. When Prince Gracius peered down at it, he burst into laughter.

"Is that the crown after someone's dropped it? You're definitely not a natural artist."

"I can't keep my hand steady with all this shaking. Normally I draw much better."

"If you say so. Maybe you could draw the Lagrangian crown, then. What does that look like?"

"In Lagrange, each king has his own crown made, so there are lots of them. The current king's crown is something like this, if I recall." I drew an approximation of it. "The design is elegant and sophisticated. Like yours, it's surprisingly modest, without too many jewels. However, it is made entirely of solid gold."

"Gosh."

"Past kings had crowns so covered in jewels that it was dazzling to look at them. When they were put on display in a museum, there was a huge line of

people to see them. They were very pretty, but my main thought was that a crown like that must have been incredibly heavy to wear.”

“And a crown feels heavy enough already. It definitely doesn’t need physical weight on top of that.”

He laughed with a hint of irony. No doubt he was thinking about when he’d have to wear a crown of his own. It was a day I hoped we’d soon be meeting with a smile. The war would end, and the current leadership would be dissolved. And yet, after that, he’d still be left with countless problems. The weight on him would be great indeed.

Well, first we have to actually find the crown. I really wonder where it is. Lutin and the knights have searched everywhere, but they still haven’t seen hide nor hair of it.

There was nothing else I could do in the shaking carriage, so I focused on speculating about the Holy Crown’s location. Though I wondered if there might be some strange twist like in a novel, human nature suggested it would likely be something simpler. I tried to think of the most obvious place that could still be easily missed.

The inside of the building had already been fully investigated. They’d even tried looking above the ceiling, and on the roof, and had climbed up trees in the garden, finding little more there than squirrels’ nests.

If not above, then below—but they’d already checked the cellar as well. Beneath that was nothing but earth. Could it have been buried somewhere? But Lord Simeon hadn’t ignored this possibility either. The ground in the vicinity of the church had been thoroughly checked. Also, digging a hole was actually easier said than done. You needed a shovel, and it was loud and visible enough to draw attention. I’d once tried to plant flower beds, imitating my brother, but the untilled ground had been harder than I expected. With all due respect to Prince Gracius, he was relatively weak for a man. He’d find it quite difficult.

Not only would he be unable to do it alone without being noticed, but it would be obvious that a hole had been dug and then covered up. The crown would have been found by now. It has to be something else.

However, just as I was about to rule it out entirely, something occurred to me.

Wait. What if he didn't dig a hole himself, but used one that was already there? He might have done something similar to his lie about throwing it into the river, the difference being that it wouldn't be swept away by the current, so he could recover it later if need be.

I racked my brain trying to recall anywhere that might be possible at the church. At that moment, however, I was interrupted as the carriage jolted violently.

While I'd been lost in thought, we had made it through the thicket and were now approaching the most perilous portion of the road to Sans-Ravel. On the left, the mountains rose at a steep diagonal angle, and on the right, a cliff descended sharply. The road was only wide enough for a single carriage, and any lapse of attention would send us tumbling down the cliff. I'd found this stretch of the journey rather terrifying even on the initial journey there.

Naturally, this meant the escort party couldn't ride alongside us and had to stay in front and behind. Any attack would probably have to come from one of those two directions anyway. The bigger concern was the state of the road. We were shaking furiously. The rocks strewn everywhere caused a terrifying jerk every time the wheels hit one.

I poked my head out of the window and saw that water was flowing down the slope and spilling onto the road, a lingering effect of the past few days' terrible weather. The route to Sans-Ravel had already been checked to ensure there were no landslides before the journey, but now that we were here, I couldn't help being afraid of what might happen. I could already see rocks falling, including some large enough that they might more accurately be called boulders. The riders were cautiously rushing about to avoid taking a direct hit.

"This road is awful," said Prince Gracius.

"If we make it past here, we're practically at Sans-Ravel. Just a little longer and—"

I gasped, interrupted by a heavy *thud* above our heads. A rock had hit the roof of our carriage. *This is scary.*

In a particularly loud voice, Lord Simeon cried, "Hurry! We must get past this stretch with all haste!"

The nervous tension in his voice sent a shiver through me. Did a landslide look imminent? When I poked my head out again to look up, I heard another loud noise.

I yelped as at the very next moment, the slope crumbled, an immense dust cloud rising. With an ominous roar, boulders and sediment began to rush down the slope. All at once, I heard a mixture of people's cries and horses' whinnies.

The landslide hit us before there was time to react. This time I screamed, holding onto the edge of my seat for dear life. The carriage shook with an intensity far beyond anything thus far, with the dreadful sounds of impact to match. Earth and rocks flew in through the open window. The air outside was filled with shouts. A voice inside me said I had to protect Prince Gracius, but in the moment, there was absolutely nothing I could do.

The carriage lurched, sending us sliding sideways on our seats and slamming against the wall. I cried out again, unable to contain my fear that we would tumble off the cliff. *We're going to fall. I know it.*

To my great relief, we didn't keep sliding straight off the cliff. After a single heavy impact, the shaking stopped, and we gingerly raised our heads. I wasn't sure what had happened. Through the window, all I could see were the mountains and the sky. Given the position we were left in, it seemed we'd been stopped by the trees growing on the cliffside.

"Lord Lucio, are you all right?" I asked, struggling to speak.

I sat up as slowly as I could, trying not to shake the tipped-over carriage. I had been thrown to the floor and Prince Gracius was precariously balanced on the seat.

"Yes, I'm fine. You?"

"Me too."

"What happened, anyway?"

"I think we were about to fall off the edge, then we got caught on a tree." Nervously, I added, "I only hope it'll hold."

I wondered what the situation was like outside, anxious that it might be some

time before help arrived. *Lord Simeon didn't get caught in the landslide, did he?*

A new fear overcame me. Unable to bear the suspense any longer, I reached out, but before I could grab the edges of the window above me, I finally heard voices. For a brief instant, relief washed over me, but then I realized none of them were calling out to me. They were violent cries ringing with anger. Among the din, I heard gunshots, too.

An enemy attack. A fight is going on right next to us. What an awful moment to be attacked! In fact, was the landslide caused by the enemy? Did Lord Simeon warn everyone to hurry because he noticed the attack coming?

I didn't know what to do. Trying to clamber out might be more dangerous than staying in the carriage, but I didn't know how long I'd be safe here either. As my mind spun in circles, I heard the rustling of steps in the undergrowth. Someone was approaching.

I drew back in fright. *Is it friend or foe?* Holding my breath, I stared at the window.

A face peered in. "Marielle!"

Oh, thank goodness! I almost cried in relief. Lord Simeon had come to save me!

"Are both of you all right?"

"Yes," I replied hurriedly, "we're unharmed. Are we under attack?"

"Yes, but our men are holding them at bay. The front carriage managed to slip away, so more than half of the enemy forces have followed them. Their continued assault here is merely a precaution, I'm sure. They'll leave as soon as they confirm that Prince Gracius isn't here, so I need you both to come outside."

"Certainly."

Lord Simeon reached into the carriage. I turned to Prince Gracius and invited him to go before me. His rescue was more important than mine, and the enemy also had to see him and believe that wasn't the prince. *It is, of course, but he looks just like Earl Maximilian!*

Lord Simeon extended his hand to Prince Gracius, then lifted him out with one arm, despite him being a fully grown man. For a brief moment, however, I did see him screw up his face. The arm he'd extended was his dominant one—his right arm. He didn't have a change of clothes, so the sleeve was still torn and stained with blood. *He's trying to act as if it's nothing, but he's still in pain. Is his wound worse than he's letting on?*

As I watched and fretted, Prince Gracius was rescued from the toppled carriage. A knight came from behind to take charge of him while Lord Simeon extended his arm toward me.

"Now you, Marielle."

"Oh! Right!"

I hesitated, wondering if I should really take his hand, or if that would worsen his injury.

"Marielle, hurry!" he urged.

There was no time to spend worrying about that. He strained to reach in, leaning so far down that I feared he might fall. I reached out as far as I could too. Grasping me with one hand and holding on firmly to the edge of the window with the other, he pulled me up with all his might. With his other hand, he held on firmly to the window. I put all my effort into clambering up as well. *I have to do whatever I can to lighten the burden for him. Oh, but my skirt's getting caught! Why do women's clothes have to be so impractical?*

It was more of an effort than it had been for the prince, but ultimately I made it all the way out of the carriage. Now I could see that the carriage had stopped just short of falling. The horses had been dragged to the ground along with it and were struggling. I felt really sorry for them, but there was nothing I could do. The fight was still going on. The soldiers were firing at our foes, who were firing down from atop the slope. Bullets aimed in our direction were hitting the ground with a sharp noise.

"Get behind that tree."

It was too risky to stay out in the open. Everyone was using the trees as a shield; the soldier guarding Prince Gracius took him behind the trees as well.

After making sure that I'd reached safe ground, Lord Simeon pulled the pistol from his holster. The sound of him cocking the gun made me gulp hard. Suddenly, the gunfire from above halted, as though they'd run out of ammunition. Lord Simeon seized that moment, leaping out from behind the trees and firing. A small scream rang out from above.

He fired shot after shot. Following his lead, the soldiers opened fire again too. Amid the tremendous din of gunfire, I cowered behind the tree, doing all I could to remain out of sight.

Before long the skirmish was over and all was quiet. The soldiers, who had been watching intently to see if it was safe, began to move. Even as they made their way along the road one by one, no further shots resounded. It seemed the enemy had retreated.

Lord Simeon came over to me. "Marielle, it's safe now." He took my hand and we finally returned to the road.

"Did they run off?"

"It's more likely they left to pursue the other carriage instead."

He cast his eyes along the road ahead. The crumbled earth had formed a mound, though not one we wouldn't be able to cross. We'd have to leave the carriages behind, but the people and horses could climb over. Now that it was safe, the soldiers finally rescued the horses from their plight.

Looking up the slope again, it appeared as though a gouge had been hollowed out of it. Though I'd heard my father-in-law explain how the very nature of the local landscape made landslides a common occurrence, it was still shocking to see up close. If the entire slope had come down, we'd probably have been beyond saving. *Maybe that was the enemy's intention, and when the landslide was smaller than anticipated, they followed up with a direct attack.*

"Am I right in thinking the landslide wasn't a coincidence? That it was a trap laid by the enemy?"

"Yes. We heard an explosion when it happened. They used gunpowder."

So that was the sound I'd heard before—an explosion of gunpowder. Thinking back, I'd seen a cloud of dust as well.

“They didn’t attack us earlier when the trees gave us poor visibility on the road, so it seemed likely that they’d strike here instead. Only, it didn’t occur to me until moments before it happened that they’d see it as a chance to bury us all together. If only I’d realized sooner.”

Lord Simeon balled his hands into fists, frustration clear on his face. I looked around at the others nearby. There were five soldiers from the escort squadron and four royal guards. Those were the ones who had been guarding the rear carriage. The others had avoided being caught in the landslide and escaped along the road. The reason they hadn’t turned back was likely because the enemy was pursuing them in even greater numbers than us.

“Can’t you think of it as realizing just in time?” I suggested. “Thanks to your warning, His Highness was able to escape.”

A couple of the royal guards agreed with me.

“That’s right, Vice Captain!”

“We were behind them, so it’s only natural that we couldn’t follow them. Can’t we be glad that everyone’s safe?”

I nodded. “Exactly! Not to mention that the enemy appears to have decided we’re of no interest, just as we intended. His Highness’s plan was a success.”

They’d left Prince Gracius behind, having not seen through his disguise. The perfect deception.

“That only makes me more concerned for His Highness and those guarding him,” he replied.

“There are more of them than us, and they should be able to make a beeline straight for Sans-Ravel. Surely they’ll be fine.”

This wasn’t a moment to spend lost in worry, so Lord Simeon quickly pulled himself together and told all the men with him that they were to start moving with the aim of catching up to the other group. Prince Gracius was to ride double behind one of the soldiers.

Lord Simeon brought his horse over. “Leave the luggage for now. We’ll have to recover it later.”

“Don’t worry. I thought something like this might happen, so I only brought the bare minimum with me.”

I said hello to the horse and turned sideways. Lord Simeon offered his hands to lift me up, but I refused and raised my foot onto the stirrup on my own. As I looked down, careful to avoid misstepping and falling, a small rock rolled toward the horse’s feet.

Another landslide? I anxiously looked up at the slope. Except for the area where bare soil had been exposed, the area was covered in trees and grass, and everything appeared firmly rooted.

Then, suddenly, something moved in my field of vision. With a gasp, I moved away from the horse. *The enemy’s still here!* And the gun wasn’t aimed at Prince Gracius, or at me of course, but at...

I pushed Lord Simeon out of the way. At the very same moment, a gunshot rang out. The bullet flew toward us at horrifying speed and sent a few strands of hair flying to the floor.

“They’re still here?!” Lord Simeon cried. Barely a second later, he and his men had readied their guns.

The horse reared up in shock. In a panic, I ran to avoid being kicked. Then a bullet hit the ground right next to me again. I ran backwards, acting on pure instinct—but then my feet slipped. I’d come too close to the edge of the road. I tried desperately to keep my footing, but I couldn’t.

Lord Simeon rushed toward me as I started falling off the cliff. “Marielle!”

It was too late to pull me back, though. Soon he was tumbling down along with me. I had enough awareness to know that he’d wrapped his arms around me in an effort to shield me, but beyond that, I was too busy bracing myself for the impact that was to come to think about anything else.

I’m falling. I’m sliding down the cliff face.

My body had slammed into the steep slope and was now descending rapidly, not stopping for a moment. It hurt despite Lord Simeon’s effort to protect me. Trees and chunks of rock were hitting me so quickly that I couldn’t discern which was which anymore. *This is it. I’m going to die.* I couldn’t even manage a

scream; I simply hunched up to try and bear it as best I could. *I'm scared. I don't want to die. Please, if not me, then at least save Lord Simeon!*

I heard a guttural cry. Who had made that sound, unable to bear it any longer—me or Lord Simeon? I couldn't even tell. The pain and shock made my consciousness fade. I may have even fainted for a moment. When the pain finally abated and I returned to my senses, I realized our descent had stopped.

Groaning, I managed to raise my head. *I'm still alive. My body hurts all over, which means I can't be dead.* Ironically enough, the pain was proof that I was safe.

I moved my arms, which I'd folded tightly against my chest, and lifted my upper body. Then, a weight slipped down from on top of me. Lord Simeon had been holding me, but now he fell limply to the ground, his eyes closed.

My breath stopped. A chill ran through my whole body, and then in the next moment, the opposite, a boiling torrent. My head flared up with such heat that I could barely think.

"No..."

I trembled all over. Struggling with the effort to a ridiculous degree, I reached out and touched Lord Simeon's cheeks. His closed eyelids did not move at all. Nor did his cheeks or his lips. He was perfectly still.

"No, this... It can't be... No!"

Crawling, I leaned in closer and put my hands around his face. I could still feel warmth in him. *What about his breathing? Is he still breathing?* I couldn't tell. Everything was blurry and I couldn't see properly.

I began to sob. "No... Lord Simeon..."

My tears fell in droplets onto my glasses. I was about to shake him, but at the last second I remembered it was better not to move him if I didn't have to, and stopped myself. My throat was so strained that I could barely wring any words from it.

"Lord Simeon! Lord Simeon! Lord...Si..." I called his name again and again, but my words were soon lost amid my weeping. Instead of shaking him, I gently

stroked his cheek as I continued to cry. “Lord Simeon...”



At last, he responded. A soft groan came from his lips and his eyebrows drew together.

He's alive! Spurred on by my newfound hope, I stroked his cheek again. "Lord Simeon!"

He screwed up his face and made pained noises. Finally, he opened his eyes. Frail though he appeared at this moment, those light blue eyes were the same as ever. My tears had almost stopped, but they welled up again.

"Mari...elle..."

"Lord Simeon..."

I whimpered. *He's alive. He's alive!* I couldn't think of anything else. *Thank you, God! My husband is alive! He's still alive!*

I simply heaved with sobs, unable to form any words. Lord Simeon took in a heavy breath, then let it out again, his face screwed up in distress. He raised his arms and touched my cheeks. With the gentle touch of his large, gloved hands, he wiped away my tears.

"Don't cry," he wheezed. His usual strong, confident tone was gone, replaced by one far more fragile. Still, he had full awareness and knew that I was there.

Thank you, God, for saving this man. Please, let him stay by my side forever.

"Lord Simeon..."

"Are you...hurt at all?" Despite his own condition, the first thing he was worried about was my well-being.

I shook my head. "No, not at all. You're the one who's hurt."

"I'm fine... Please don't cry..." He started to sit up.

"No, you mustn't move!"

He ignored my attempt to stop him. He was no doubt racked with terrible pain; his usually placid face was contorted, and he let out an uncharacteristic moan. I hurriedly offered a hand to support his back. Normally he'd never want or need me to do such a thing, but now his weight was resting on me. I supported him as firmly as I could, determined not to give out.

“Thank you,” he said at last. “I’m fine.”

He finally managed to sit up properly and checked over his arms and legs.

“Are you injured?” I asked with some trepidation.

“I believe I’m fine,” he replied. He rubbed the side of his chest under his armpit, and wore a troubled expression. It looked like he could still move his arms without difficulty, at least. If he could sit up like this, his back had to be fine as well.

“My legs are only bruised as well. What about you, Marielle? Can you move?”

“Yes, I think I’m fine.”

Both of us were covered in mud and looked decidedly worse for wear. Wet leaves and branches that had broken off during the fall were clinging to our hair. While brushing those off, I gauged my own condition. My body hurt all over, but I didn’t appear to have sustained any serious injuries such as broken bones.

It must be because Lord Simeon wrapped himself around me. If he hadn’t, I’d be in a much worse state, I’m sure. I might have even died. I could have broken my neck.

That in turn meant that Lord Simeon had taken the brunt of the damage, which made it a huge relief to see him up and moving. Somehow he’d avoided being hurt too badly despite shielding me.

He reached up and touched his battered face and murmured, suddenly realizing, “My glasses.”

Now that he mentioned it, his glasses were gone. They must have been thrown off during the descent. Mine had somehow stayed on my face, no doubt thanks to Lord Simeon holding me so tightly to his chest, although they had slipped down my nose. I pushed them back up only to find that they didn’t quite fit properly anymore. After taking them off to check, I saw that the arms were bent. “How vexing after we had them made to match.”

We’d ordered specially made pairs with symbols on them to represent each other. Mine had lilies and his had violets. We’d used them in our wedding

ceremony in place of our lost rings, which gave them a deep emotional significance.

Seeing how sad I was, Lord Simeon smiled. “If both pairs are beyond hope anyway, we can just have a new matching set made. The glasses don’t matter as long as you’re safe.”

His words made relief and joy sweep through me again. *It’s true. He’s safe, and that’s all that matters.*

“I’m so sorry. It’s my fault you fell. That you ended up in this state.”

“I’m the one who should be saying that. You saved me from a bullet. Thank you.”

He smiled as he pulled some grass out of my hair. *Is that true? Did I protect him for once?* It was hard to be too thrilled about it, though, given what had happened next.

I looked up. With all the grass and trees growing out of the steep slope, I couldn’t see to the top of the cliff. It felt like we’d fallen a long way, but if we were still alive, we couldn’t be too far from where we had started. However, if so, I’d expect to hear some of the men calling down to us. Instead, there was nothing but the rustling sounds of nature. The already gloomy weather combined with the impending sunset to make everything dim and hazy, exacerbating my unease.

Droplets began to fall, hitting the grass around us with a pattering sound.

“It’s raining.”

The rain formed a fine mist around us. Lost in the mountains and surrounded by a curtain of cold, our ordeal was just beginning.

Chapter Twelve

We took a little time to catch our breath, but Lord Simeon soon hinted that it was time to stand up. “It’s dangerous to stay here too long. We should start moving.”

“Do you think the enemy will come for us?”

“No, but don’t forget that they caused the landslide. The terrain is already unstable here, so it could easily start slipping again. If so, it’ll probably flow down to where we’re standing.”

Shuddering at this horrible thought, I stood up. Lord Simeon slowly did so as well. There was something stiff about his movement that concerned me greatly. As I watched, worried, he stood firmly on both feet. At that moment, his gun dropped to the ground. It looked as though the holster had come open, so it had been on the verge of falling out.

He picked up the gun and checked how many bullets he had left. Instead of putting it back in the holster, he put it in the back of his trousers, where it would be hidden under his jacket.

“Why are you putting it there?”

He paused a moment. “No reason in particular.”

Lord Simeon was not a man who did anything for no reason in particular. *He’s keeping those last bullets in reserve as a hidden ace up his sleeve. Does that mean he thinks it’s possible we’ll be attacked again? I’m sure he’s pretending otherwise to avoid scaring me.*

“Do you think anyone will come and rescue us?” I asked hesitantly.

“I wouldn’t count on that. In such an eventuality, the orders were to strictly follow the order of priority.”

Despite his calm tone, his words were rather cold. *The order of priority. I assume that means protecting Prince Gracius is more important than saving us.*

“Focusing on a rescue attempt while the enemy is close by would put the mission at risk. First they should regroup with the party that escaped and safely transport His Highness, Prince Gracius, and you-know-who to Sans-Ravel. Rescue efforts will come after that.”

It was almost sunset. From what Lord Simeon was saying, the absolute earliest any rescue party would look for us was tomorrow. “It’s not too far to Sans-Ravel from here, is it?” I asked. “Could we get there on our own if we were so determined?”

Compared to waiting for rescue that might not come for a long time, walking seemed like it might be quicker. We weren’t too injured for it, and the distance wasn’t prohibitive either. If we made it through the mountains, we’d reach inhabited land again. There we’d be able to ask for help and rejoin the royal guards.

The problem was that our surroundings were thickly wooded, with no clear road in sight. Also, the place where we’d landed was relatively level, but we’d soon encounter more steep slopes if we started moving again. It was clear that it wouldn’t be an easy journey.

Which way should we even go? Hmm, if we keep the cliff on our left, then it should be a relatively direct route to Sans-Ravel. Or rather, it would if not for the fact that we can’t necessarily go in a straight line. What if we get turned around and don’t know if we’re going the right way anymore?

“The adventurers in books always have compasses with them.” My shoulders slumped. I hadn’t come that prepared.

Lord Simeon took my hand. “We know the rough direction, at least. We can’t stay here, so we should make a start.”

As the light rain kept falling, we slowly got moving.

“Watch your step. There are a lot of wet leaves.”

“I’ll be careful.”

Hand in hand with my husband, I walked through the mountains. Gradually, the rain grew heavier and the boughs of the trees began to shake. As my glasses were covered with more and more raindrops, they started obstructing my

vision more than helping it, so I removed them and stowed them away in my skirt pocket. When I put my hand in, I touched something else that I'd forgotten was in there. *Good thing I thought to move that over when I got changed. I never expected anything like this to happen, but it could definitely come in handy.*

"Lord Simeon, are you sure you're all right without your glasses?"

"My eyesight's fine if we're just walking. I'm nearsighted, like you."

"And how is the wound on your arm? I hope this didn't aggravate it."

I looked at his torn sleeve. With how wet and muddy it was, I couldn't tell if there was fresh blood.

"I told you, the bullet only grazed me. In its current state, I wouldn't count it as a particularly terrible injury."

I wonder if he's telling the truth. I'm sure he wouldn't tell me even if it was painful. It really looks like he's moving more slowly than usual. I'll have to keep a close eye.

Putting his own condition to one side, he offered me some encouragement instead. "I know this is tough, but please hold strong. It'll be all right. We're not too far from civilization, so we won't have to wander around in the wilderness for long. His Highness is sure to send a search party as soon as he is able, so there's no reason for pessimism."

He was laden down with his weapons and such, so it had to be worse for him, but he still focused on my difficulties. Eager to reduce his burden however I could, I looked at my husband with a smile.

"I'm not feeling pessimistic at all. I'm with you, after all. There's nothing for me to worry about."

"Indeed," he replied after a moment.

"Earlier, it took some time for you to open your eyes. That was terrifying. I thought I'd lost you. Compared to that fear, this is absolutely fine."

We stepped carefully through the wet foliage. My skirt soaked up water and became much heavier. My hair was dripping wet as well.

At this rate, the sun will set before we even make it out of the mountains. I imagine it's pitch black at night out here, which will make it too dangerous to walk around. The only option will be to find somewhere to shelter us from the rain and camp outside.

In a deliberately cheerful tone, I said, "Let's stop before it gets too dark. I still remember everything you taught me when we went camping on Enciel Island. It was good fun!"

With a faint smile, Lord Simeon nodded.

"I never expected that experience to be useful so quickly," I added. "I'll do whatever it takes. Why don't you teach me how to fire a gun this time? That would be delightful!"

"Don't get carried away."

I thought this might be the situation where he'd finally agree to that, but alas, he firmly rejected the proposal after all. In an instant, his eyes took on a firm look.

"A gun is not something for inexperienced hands to toy with. If you handle it incorrectly, it can even explode. As weapons go, they're far more dangerous than a sword, with enough destructive force to take a life in a split-second. There are countless examples of people accidentally killing themselves or others nearby. Even if a gun lands on the floor right in front of you, don't touch it. Do you understand? You absolutely must not lay a single finger on a gun."

This tediously long-winded lecture made me pout sullenly. Still, I was glad to see Lord Simeon acting just like himself.

"Rather than using weapons, you should fight with your intellect. For example—ah, yes! Why don't we think about where the crown might be hidden?"

In an effort to distract my attention from guns, Lord Simeon had changed the subject rather drastically. Repressing my urge to burst out laughing, I played along for his sake.

"That is a mystery indeed. I've spent a long time thinking about it." Murmuring, I added, "Actually, I felt like I almost managed to figure it out earlier."

“Oh, really?” He stopped, suddenly looking very interested. “Did Prince Gracius tell you something?”

“No, he still doesn’t remember. An idea came to me, though.”

I stopped in place as well and racked my brain. *Something definitely occurred to me. Right before the attack, I was following a thread of some sort, but then I lost it.*

“Let me think. What was it? Oh yes! I was considering the possibility that it had been buried.”

“That had occurred to me as a possibility, but we didn’t find any sign of the ground having been dug up.”

“Yes, but... That’s it! What if instead of digging a hole, he used a hole that was there already! Is there a well near the church?”

“There is,” he answered readily. Just as I was getting excited, though, he continued, “We searched inside it as well, of course. Sadly, we didn’t find anything.”

“Oh, I see.”

“I had every other well in the vicinity checked as well, just in case, but no luck.”

In seconds, my hopes had been dashed. *And I was so sure. How annoying!*

I slumped over, disappointed. I may have looked slightly *too* miserable, as Lord Simeon began consoling me in a tone he might use for a child. “We essentially only looked on the church grounds, so it is still possible it was buried somewhere else. When we have a chance, we can expand the search radius to include the entire town.”

“I doubt that’s the answer. The locals would have noticed if a stranger appeared and started digging a hole.”

“Not necessarily. He could have done it at night or in an inconspicuous location.”

“Digging a hole is hard work, too. Unless it’s really soft earth, like a flower bed, you’d at least need a shovel.”

“I’m sure that would be the case with a woman’s strength.”

“Physical strength isn’t the prince’s strong suit either, so I imagine it would be similar for him. Also, he didn’t have the crown with him when the priest took him in, which means he must have hidden it as soon as he reached the town. If it were you, would you be able to find a suitable place to bury something in a town you’d never been to before, then dig a hole without anybody noticing? With no tools?”

Lord Simeon frowned and thought for a moment. “There are a lot of small vegetable plots dotted about. They even grow vegetables behind the church.”

“Oh! No, no, he can’t have used that. There’d be too much risk of it being dug up.”

We both groaned. A vegetable garden would be a simple place to dig a hole and bury something, but the only one who’d ever choose it as a hiding place was the person responsible for the plot.

“It must be somewhere else after all,” he mused.

“But where else would be such an easy place to dig a hole?”

Then, at the same time, we both exclaimed, “Oh!”

There was somewhere right by the church where the earth would be soft. Not all of it; some would be packed down firmly by people walking on it after the rain. However, there would definitely still be some earth that was fresh enough.

As soon as that detail occurred to me, everything fell into place. All the hints I’d gathered so far had been pointing to it. There had even been a clue hidden in what the priest had told me. It was all connected.

“I see now,” I said, still processing it.

At last, I saw it all so clearly. The information I’d gathered without knowing the solution had come together in my mind. *It has to be there. I’m sure of it.*

Full of certainty now, I looked at Lord Simeon. “I see now! I know exactly where the crown is! It’s—”

Just as I was about to announce it, he covered my mouth. His hand felt cold and held the scent of earth. He turned to look in a different direction. The

firmness of his expression made my heart thud terribly.

Other sounds were mixed in with those of the wind and rain. Footsteps were drawing closer through the underbrush. Realizing that we were aware of his presence, the man decided to stop hiding and show himself openly. It was the Silver Fox, accompanied by two other operatives. Lord Simeon drew his saber in an instant.

“Following you was the right choice, I see.”

His voice was unfittingly cheerful for the situation. When he smiled, his eyes narrowing even more, the scene from earlier came back to me. The one who’d aimed the gun at Lord Simeon—that had been the Silver Fox as well. I’d only caught sight of him briefly from a distance, but I was certain. That was how I knew instinctively that it was Lord Simeon he was aiming for.

The Silver Fox had a grudge against us. After seeing us fall off the cliff, he’d gone out of his way to follow us down rather than shifting his attention to Prince Gracius. He intended to see with his own eyes that we were really dead, and to deliver the finishing blow if we weren’t. The persistence of his malice gave me goosebumps.

The Silver Fox had two companions with him, and all three guns were aimed squarely at us.

“It seems all that business about having found the crown was a lie after all,” he said, his merry tone cutting through the pounding rain. “Fortunately, it sounds as though you’ve located it after all. How convenient for me. You know, you really are an incredible person. From your appearance, no one would ever guess how your mind is always whirring. I find myself growing ever more fond of you. Now, where is it hidden?”

Lord Simeon was poised and ready to strike, but he didn’t move. Facing the Silver Fox one-on-one would be a different matter, but right now he was staring down the barrels of three guns while trying to keep me safe behind him. Even Lord Simeon’s chances were dubious.

“Based on your conversation just now, it seems like it must be buried in the graveyard, but can you tell me more precisely? I’d be awfully grateful.”

Clinging to Lord Simeon's jacket, I steeled myself and then said, "Let's make a deal."

My husband turned to look at me, but I shook my head lightly and softly clapped him on the back to give a signal the Silver Fox and his men wouldn't see.

"Surely you didn't expect that I'd simply tell you?" I added. "You have to do something for me in return."

"My, my. You certainly are confident."

"You'll never, ever find the crown on your own. All you know is that it's in the graveyard, and there's no way you would be able to dig it all up. To find it without drawing undue attention you need a more specific location, and I'm the only one who knows that right now."

"Hmm."

I swallowed hard, my throat drying up from nerves. I had to stay calm. *It's all right. All I need to do is create an opening, however small.*

Lord Simeon was tense as well, but he didn't lose his head. He watched the enemy's movements without missing a thing.

"Well then, what would you like me to do?"

"It's about your guns, of course. I'd like you to keep them pointed downward until Lord Simeon has gotten away."

Lord Simeon drew in a sharp breath. Despite the signal I'd given him, he seemed determined to say something. I shook my head as firmly as I could to stop him.

"Marielle," he began, but I quickly interrupted.

"Please, just do it."

Does he not realize what I'm aiming at? Please, Lord Simeon, follow my lead right now. This is our only way of escaping from this.

I couldn't explain my plan in words, so I pleaded intently with my gaze instead. He bit his lip with such force that I feared he might draw blood;

however he was taking this, he wasn't thrilled.

The Silver Fox's gaze turned to Lord Simeon. "You want me to let him go, in other words."

This couldn't be an easy trade for him to agree to. He'd followed us with the specific goal of ending Lord Simeon's life. He had a mission, however. He couldn't let a personal grudge take priority—I hoped, at least. I wasn't sure if reason would prevail.

"If I let this nuisance of a man survive, I know I'll regret it later."

"If you kill Lord Simeon, I will never tell you where the crown is hidden. Never. I would immediately take my own life. I refuse to be left in this world alone—I'd go to meet my maker right alongside him. Good luck digging up every last inch of that graveyard!"

Lord Simeon's hands were trembling—both his right hand that held the saber and his left that was balled tightly. I wrapped both of my hands around his fist, willing him to be calm.

The Silver Fox laughed derisively. "What a pathetic sight from the renowned Vice Captain of the Royal Order of Knights. His wife is pleading for his life! Yes, this is exactly the look I wanted to see on your face. You look far better now that your perfect visage is stained with humiliation."

Lord Simeon gritted his teeth.

"Imagine having a woman protect you, then abandoning her and running away on your own. It's truly marvelous. The ultimate disgrace!"

He erupted into peals of laughter. The two operatives on either side of him both glanced his way, but neither said a word. It seemed that whatever they were really thinking, they had no intention of disobeying the Silver Fox. *What a shame. It would be better for us if they started arguing among themselves.*

After laughing for a short while, the Silver Fox lowered his gun. "Very well. I accept the terms of your trade. One day I certainly will kill him, but for now I must be satisfied with this. I've wanted to make him feel the same humiliation that I did. Yes, perhaps it's even better than simply killing him."

The Silver Fox's hand moved to his shoulder and grasped at the fabric of his clothes. The desire for revenge flickered in his twisted smile. The wound from where he'd been shot by Lord Simeon appeared to be fully healed by now, but I had no doubt that it had been serious indeed. A gunshot wound could cause gangrene, I recalled. Your body rotted, turning pitch black. Underneath his clothes, was there flesh the color of charcoal? Even after the pain was gone, seeing the aftermath every day would no doubt stoke his enmity.

"That's who you'll be from now on. The man who sacrificed his wife so that he could escape. Oh, and don't worry. After we've found the crown, I'll take excellent care of her. After I take her to Orta, I'll take my time to break her completely. She'll forget all about her husband and become my obedient little doll."

Lord Simeon grunted in frustration, but I kept hold of his fist with every ounce of effort I could manage. *He's clearly trying to raise your hackles! Don't let him bait you!*

The Silver Fox looked Lord Simeon up and down and then nodded. Presumably he'd seen the empty holster, or he wouldn't have agreed.

"Leave your saber. I'd like you to be unarmed when you make your escape."

Yes. He's fallen for it.

I repressed the urge to jump for joy. If he sensed anything awry, it would be over. This was our one and only chance at victory.

I looked into Lord Simeon's eyes, then reached out my hand toward the saber and asked him to hand it to me.

"Marielle..."

"It's fine. Isn't that right?"

There was no way Lord Simeon couldn't have seen what was going on, but he was still hesitating. In the end, though, he gave in and surrendered the saber to me.

It was heavy in my hands. I held it up with both hands and slowly moved away from Lord Simeon. I made sure I was positioned at a distance from the Silver

Fox and his henchmen. I prayed that the increasingly powerful rain would obstruct their vision just enough.

The Silver Fox waved a hand and the other two lowered their weapons. Now that there were no longer any guns aimed at him, Lord Simeon started to move as well. Careful to ensure they never saw his back, he stepped away, facing them the whole time.

The Ortans, presumably taking this as perfectly reasonable caution, reacted to Lord Simeon just a moment too late. A gunshot rang out through the rain. The bullet he fired barely missed the Silver Fox and hit the man behind him straight on.

“Why, you...!”

The Silver Fox raised his gun and went to fire back—but Lord Simeon was too quick for him. His second shot sent the gun flying from the Silver Fox’s hand. A third shot resounded and the other henchman collapsed, crying out in pain.

Lord Simeon ran toward me. I turned to him and desperately held out the saber. He returned the pistol to its holster and took the saber from me. He’d run out of bullets to fire.

The Silver Fox bore down on Lord Simeon. “You bastard!”

Lord Simeon deflected his knife strike with the saber, then shooed me away. I hurriedly withdrew. My part was over now, and I would only get in the way if I stayed too close. I jumped behind a nearby tree to hide. *Now that it’s a head-to-head duel, there’s no way Lord Simeon will be defeated. He’s far superior to the Silver Fox, after all!*

Water splashed up around their feet. The Silver Fox aimed for vital organs with unnatural swiftness, while Lord Simeon intercepted him with confident skill. Neither of them let up for even a moment. I held my breath and prayed. *God, please grant him your divine protection!*

No matter how agile the Silver Fox was, a prolonged fight would only benefit Lord Simeon, I was sure. The Ortan’s approach was to watch for weak points and strike, so a face-to-face battle like this gave my husband the advantage.

And yet, for some reason, he didn’t deliver a decisive blow. I couldn’t see well

due to the rain, but it didn't look like he was holding back on purpose. I had the feeling he was struggling a great deal. *Why? At such close range, it shouldn't be a problem that he doesn't have his glasses. Is it that a sword with such a long blade is awkward to use in the mountains, when there are so many obstacles to get in the way?*

Suddenly, the Silver Fox broke into wild laughter. "Hah...ha ha ha ha!" The manic ring to it made a shiver run through me. *What's happened? Why is he laughing?*

"You appear to be in quite some pain! Is there something wrong with your right arm—your dominant arm? You're having trouble using it!"

What? Panic took over me for a moment. Is it because of the gunshot wound? Was it worse than he admitted after all?

"Die!"

They were moving too quickly for me to follow. Lord Simeon dodged the knife that came toward him, staggering. The Silver Fox took advantage of this and stuck again. Lord Simeon couldn't regain his balance in time to strike back—or so I thought. The next instant, he was standing firm after all. With a grunt of exertion, he delivered a powerful kick to the Silver Fox. The latter's slender body flew backwards and rolled on the ground.

As he tumbled backwards, he caught himself and started to stand back up. "I won't let you—"

But suddenly, he vanished. The sound of him sliding downwards was accompanied by a scream.

Another cliff-edge, I realized. It couldn't have been too large a drop, though, as I could still hear an energetic roar of anger from beyond the thicket.

Ignoring this, Lord Simeon turned to me and extended his hand. "Marielle! We must hurry!"



I grabbed my skirt and ran over to him. Still holding the saber in one hand, he started running, pulling me along. We ran as far as we could through the rainy mountain terrain. It no longer mattered where we were going. For now, we just had to get as much distance from our foe as possible.

Whenever I slipped on the wet ground, Lord Simeon pulled me up again straight away. The pain was clear on his face, and his breathing was ragged. He was guarding his right side. It wasn't because of the wound on his arm.

Despite it all, he didn't breathe a word about his own pain and encouraged me instead. "Not much farther... You can do it..."

I wanted to cry, but I held it all in and ran like the wind. However out of breath I was, however many times I slipped, I mustered all my strength and kept running. That was all I could do.

The rain and wind were more intense than ever now, making our flight all the more tortuous. *At least it should help cover our escape.* I couldn't hear any footsteps or voices behind us as we ran.

Eventually both of us grew sluggish and could only proceed at a walking pace. It wasn't only the fatigue that plagued us, but also the poor visibility. The sun was finally setting. If it got any darker, we wouldn't be able to see a thing. Though I couldn't focus on anything but putting one foot in front of the other, Lord Simeon constantly scouted the surroundings. By the time he finally spotted a suitable place to take refuge, the last vestiges of light were disappearing from the sky.

"There," he said.

Nearby was a small wooden building. Rather than a house, it appeared to be a small hut used for storing firewood or some such. I realized that at some point the ground underfoot had become easier to walk on. By now it was practically level, with far fewer trees. We must have almost reached civilization. Even while preoccupied with our escape, we'd gone in the right direction.

If we keep going, we might make it out of the mountains. A building like this can't be far from the road. But this thought was futile, as by now I couldn't even see my own feet. It was too dangerous to keep moving. Aside from that, I was

beyond exhausted. My whole body was screaming. When shelter from the rain was right in front of me, I couldn't pass it by.

We made our way over to the hut. The door wasn't locked, but that was just about the only good news. Up close, we could see that it was run down and long since abandoned. The windows had neither glass nor shutters, leaving them wide open to the elements. The roof was in terrible condition as well, with torrents of water leaking into the building. The door was so unsteady that it felt like it might break at the slightest touch.

In any other circumstances, we'd have never gone inside. Right now, though, it was our blessed salvation.

On the way in, I paused in the doorway and wrung out my skirt as best I could. After entering with great care to avoid stepping on any rotten floorboards, we huddled up together in a corner, avoiding the rain streaming in through the roof and windows as much as possible.

When we sat down, it was more like we had collapsed onto the floor. Unable to hide the pain anymore, Lord Simeon held his right side, breathing heavily. *Is it his ribs? He could have hurt them badly during the fall.*

Crying would be no help. Instead, I had to find out if there was some way I could ease his suffering, even if only slightly. "Is there anything I can do?"

He answered honestly, as if to admit that there was no pretending anymore. "It's just a broken rib or two. It's all right, though. That's not too grave an injury."

"But you still need some sort of treatment, don't you? What does one do with a broken rib?"

"Apart from wrapping it tightly, there isn't much that can be done. Normally you'd apply a bandage, I suppose."

I thought about what could serve as a bandage. *What could work as an adequate substitute?*

I grasped at my heavy, sopping wet skirt. If we needed cloth of some kind, this was probably the only option. The outer layer was too thick to be practical, but the petticoat was more promising. Current fashion was for skirts that weren't

too voluminous, so the petticoat didn't have multiple thick layers, but given the length, there would surely be enough.

I'd spent quite some time being annoyed at my skirt for making it so difficult to walk, but now I was grateful to have it.

"Lord Simeon, lend me your saber, please."

"What are you intending to do with it?"

"To cut this up and use it as a bandage. You essentially just need a piece of material that's long and flexible enough, don't you?"

When I rolled up my skirt to show him, he looked away like a polite gentleman despite the gravity of the situation. "Stop that," he said.

"Honestly, this is not the time for modesty or self-consciousness." I took my hands off of my skirt and put them on Lord Simeon's cheeks, then forcibly turned his head to face me. "Which is more important, modesty or seeing to your injuries?"

He didn't have a response to that.

"No one's here to see me rolling up my skirt other than you. The only one who's entitled to see my legs and my undergarments is my husband."

"That goes without saying," he replied, his tone quiet but spirited. "Do you think I could bear you showing them to anyone else?"

This made me smile a little. *What a relief to know that he can still be so lively.*

"Having said that, a vast crowd of people saw them last time. I needed to run and get help, so I ripped up my skirt and set off with my underthings on full display."

It was painful to remember. Frankly, I'd been in a far more shameful state on that occasion than I was right now. Everyone had seen, including Duke Silvestre and His Majesty the King.

"Did you show *him* as well?"

I was puzzled as to the relevance of this. "Who do you mean?"

"The man you were trying to save."

“Marquess Rafale, you mean? Well, I cut my dress up right in front of him, so he might have seen, but I doubt he was paying any attention. He was close to death, so he probably wasn’t focused on whether he could see a woman’s legs or not.”

Lord Simeon didn’t reply to me as such, though he did murmur something that sounded an awful lot like “You should have just let him die.” I was certain I had misheard, however. *There is no way that Lord Simeon would say a thing like that. No, it was undoubtedly my imagination!*

“Anyway, there’s no one else here right now except you. Besides, it’s only the layer underneath that I’m going to use. The skirt itself will stay fully intact, so that will hide my legs. Now...”

I rolled up my skirt again. It was so dark by now that it was hard to even see my hands. If we dithered for too long, it would be pitch black, and the whole endeavor would become impossible. *Usually he’s so efficient. That’s the Lord Simeon I need right now.*

I gestured toward the saber. *If he won’t let me use it, perhaps he can cut the petticoat himself.* “Come on. Don’t waste any time. I need you to do it right now!”

He paused a moment. “You needn’t push me so fervently. Being urged on by a lady with her skirt rolled up makes me feel more pathetic than overjoyed.”

“What on earth are you talking about? I was *not* urging you in *that* sense!”

Reflexively, I pushed down my skirt again. Despite the rush we were in, our faces both turned bright red, and it took some time before we were able to start working.

Chapter Thirteen

We eventually finished applying the makeshift bandage, then leaned against the wall again, exhausted. Neither the wind nor the rain showed any sign of subsiding. *I hope the rivers don't overflow again. I'm worried about the state of this hut too. It shakes and creaks whenever there's a strong gust, which is rather scary.*

On this rainy night, both the moon and stars were hidden from view, and I couldn't see the face of the man beside me either. We sat snuggled against each other, only knowing by touch, by the feeling of each other's body heat and breath, that we were both there. Lord Simeon's breathing grew steadier; binding his chest may have alleviated the pain somewhat. However, he didn't show any sign of falling asleep.

I retrieved the item in my pocket and, fumbling, untied the string at the opening of the bag. The rock candy I'd received from Lutin appeared to still be intact. I was worried it might have all melted due to getting wet, but every piece was dry to the touch. It seemed the bag was waterproof.

"Lord Simeon, could you open your mouth?"

I fumbled with my hand to find his lips, then pushed in one of the sweets. He accepted it without objection, but a moment later, with mixed feelings evident in his voice, he said, "Far too sweet."

"It's an emergency fuel supply. Effective against exhaustion."

I ate one too. It wasn't enough to fill my stomach, but the sweet candy did stave off my hunger pangs to a certain degree.

"Am I right in recalling where these came from?"

It was no surprise that Lord Simeon had realized what they were, so I made no effort to hide it. "I know you don't like it, but I'm sure you'll agree that now is not the time to be bothered by who gave them to me. Maintaining our strength has to take priority. Isn't that right?"

After a brief silence, Lord Simeon sighed and said, “Yes, indeed. This isn’t the time to be stubborn and picky. Thank you.”

I heard the sound of hard crunching. *They’re much better if you slowly savor them, you know.*

“Don’t you think it would be better for you to lie down and rest a bit?” I suggested. “It would help you recuperate more than sitting up like this.”

“Then I wouldn’t be able to respond instantly if anything happened. Ashamed as I am to admit it, in my current state I wouldn’t be able to leap up from the ground.”

“Our pursuers won’t come for us when it’s this dark, will they?”

“It’s unlikely, but not impossible. It’s fine; sitting down like this is enough of a relief. You, however, should take the opportunity to lie down. I’m keeping watch, so there’s nothing to worry about.”

My word! I grew quite impatient at him for not listening to me. “I want to let you rest. Don’t push yourself beyond your limits when you’re badly hurt.”

What I really wanted to do was drag him down onto the floor, but I couldn’t subject him to that kind of physical impact. The most I could do was gently pull on his uniform.

“Surely you’re the one who’s pushing yourself beyond your limits,” he replied. “Traipsing through the undergrowth, sleeping with no bed and without eating a proper dinner, shivering in the cold while soaking wet? I can imagine you’re barely holding on. I’m surprised you haven’t collapsed already.”

“I haven’t had to engage in combat. All I’ve done is stand behind you and let you protect me. Even while we were walking, you led the way, and picked me up countless times when I stumbled. All along, I’ve been nothing but a burden to you.”

Tears welled in my eyes as I said that, but I swallowed hard to hold them back. I couldn’t cry. If I cried now, I’d only put more pressure on Lord Simeon. My frustration, my guilt—I had to keep it all inside. *After all the difficulty I’ve caused him, the least I can do is stay strong.*

I was glad it was dark. It meant I didn't have to show Lord Simeon my face. *I'm definitely not on the verge of tears! Not at all!*

All my efforts were for naught, however. "Don't push yourself beyond your limits," he repeated.

Please, I don't want you to be the one comforting me right now. For you to do that in your condition is just unbearable.

"I—"

But he interrupted before I could interject. "You don't need to go to such efforts," he said in a firm tone. "This situation is entirely my fault. There's nothing for you to feel guilty about."

He'd seen through my bluff to the reason behind it. After a few moments I replied, "How can you think it's your fault? If I... If I hadn't fallen at that moment, none of this would have happened!"

It was too late. I'd done all I could to hold them back, but my tears came flooding out.

I didn't want to cry! I didn't want to bother Lord Simeon by showing how weak I am at such a difficult time. All I wanted was to reassure him that I was okay!

But I couldn't stop them. The tears were flowing whether I liked it or not.

Crying, I let the words I'd kept locked in my heart gush forth. "You noticed the surprise attack right before it happened and managed to keep everyone from being caught in the landslide. His Highness's plan had even gone off without a hitch. Then I fell off the cliff, and that was how we ended up here."

The fact that Lord Simeon had been hurt, the fact that we were in this horrible situation—all of it was my fault. It was so pitiful and frustrating that I couldn't hold it in anymore. My guilt at making Lord Simeon essentially carry me all this way single-handedly was overwhelming.

"It's all my fault. I wish you'd abandoned me when I fell. At least then—"

As I was speaking, Lord Simeon pulled me toward him and embraced me tightly, despite the pain this surely caused him. "I won't let you keep talking like that. Please, I don't ever want to hear you say that."

“But—”

“You didn’t do anything wrong. Do you honestly think that because you fell, you’re to blame? The problem is that you were in that situation to begin with. You’re a victim of circumstance, and why should a victim have to torment themselves thinking they’re the one at fault? When you’ve suffered so much already, why do you have to make yourself into the cause of the suffering as well?”

There was force in his voice, as though he was lecturing me, but sadness too, and even a hint of tears.

“As part of His Highness’s plan, you were supposed to be kept safe. I bore the responsibility for that. As a soldier following orders, and as your husband, it was my duty to protect you. The reason this happened is that I failed to fulfill that duty!”

We were so close to one another, but I couldn’t see his face in the pitch darkness, so I couldn’t read his expression. His voice, however, made it clear that he was anguished.

Just as I had been harboring intense guilt, it seemed Lord Simeon had been blaming himself. His arms trembled as they held me. *He always has such a strong sense of personal responsibility, so I can only imagine how difficult this must be. I know he did the very best he could in that moment, but he’s not the sort of person who can excuse himself with such a justification.*

“I couldn’t protect the one I love,” he continued. “What good am I if I can’t do that?”

Lord Simeon was probably even more grateful for the darkness than I was. This was the first time I’d ever heard him speak with so much pain in his voice. If his expression matched, I was sure he didn’t want me to see it.

“Lord Simeon,” I began, but nothing followed.

“You didn’t do anything wrong. Truly you didn’t. The fall must have hurt, and the long, treacherous journey, too. You’re wet and cold from the rain. We were ambushed, which must have been terrifying. Yet you’ve soldiered on without the slightest complaint. What have I done, meanwhile? I haven’t even managed

to reassure you that everything's all right. All I've done is make you worry about my own physical condition. I'm the one who—"

Within his tight embrace, I shifted and managed to reach out with one arm. After searching for Lord Simeon's face, I covered his mouth. *Don't say any more. I don't want to hear such sad words from you.*

I see now, though. What I said just now was wrong. It only caused Lord Simeon more pain.

"I'm sorry," I whispered while he was silenced. "I shouldn't have said I wished you had abandoned me. That was an awful thing to say, and I'm sorry."

I listened and heard his breathing shift.

"It's not true. What I really desire is for you to stay by my side like this. I don't want you to abandon me. I want to be with you forever."

Lord Simeon turned his head slightly and rubbed his cheek against my hand. "That's exactly what I want."

There in my hand was the most beloved and precious person in the world to me. I wished I could embrace his large body with mine and keep him safe. *I love him. I love him to an impossible degree.*

"You are everything to me," I replied, "and I love you so dearly. I'll stop blaming myself as well. I'm sorry. It's not a matter of who bears the most fault. We just need to keep going and work together. That's all that counts."

I couldn't see it, but I could feel his tension easing.

"We just need to go back to basics, which means each of us focusing on what we're capable of. I can't fight, but you're strong and skilled in that regard. So, if enemies come for us, please take care of them."

"Of course."

"And now is the time to rest in preparation for that. Making sure you're entirely combat ready before going into battle is a basic rule. Wouldn't you agree?"

I sensed an exhalation on my fingers. *Was that a hint of a laugh?*

“That’s true, master strategist.”

“What an honor to be called that by the brutal, blackhearted military officer.”

“I’m being serious. What Lutin said is frustrating, but it’s true. You’re so intelligent, but I disregard that and treat you as someone to be protected and nothing more. I’m sorry.”

Hearing his dispirited voice, I wore a wry smile in the darkness. *So that really was bothering him.* Even though the two of them were like oil and water, they had a strange respect for one another. Despite his annoyance, Lutin’s words had made an impact; he couldn’t see them as a merely baseless insult.

“If I have a wonderful husband to protect me, I can hardly hope for more as a woman—and I couldn’t wish for any husband more dependable than you.”

I had intended these words as a reassurance that he had nothing to worry about, but his reply came in an unexpectedly somber tone. “That’s not enough,” he said at last, lovingly snuggling up against me. “Charming and influential men tend to gather around you. The more I think about it, the less confident I am that I stand out amongst them all. I’m so stubborn and inflexible. All I do is awkwardly complain about everything. I know nothing of any popular modern pastimes either.”

Haltingly, I tried to interject. “No, you see, Lord Simeon—”

“Just because I was fortunate enough to become your husband doesn’t mean I can rest on my laurels. I need to continue to win your love every day. And yet, when I consider what I can do to justify it, nothing worthy springs to mind whatsoever.”

These excessively self-deprecating words came rushing out in a gravely serious tone. *What on earth is he talking about?*

“Wait, please! You talk about men gathering around me, but I can’t even think of anyone except Lutin.”

“It’s merely that you’re not conscious of it. Marquess Rafale has fallen for you, for example.”

“Now that is a name I didn’t expect to hear. The marquess? I can’t imagine he

sees me that way. Admittedly, he did greet me in an overly familiar manner, but we've barely even met. He's also close to twenty years my senior—and I'm constantly being compared to a child! He'd think I'm far too young for him, I'm sure."

"Love has nothing to do with any logical reasoning or criteria. You're the one who taught me that."

I exhaled, unsure how to respond. *Well, yes, I suppose that is true. It's still tough to believe that Marquess Rafale could see me of all people in that light. I'm sure he's just grateful that I saved his life. Even that's not really true. It's his own subjective assumption.*

"Even if we suppose his feelings aren't romantic," Lord Simeon added, "it's undeniable that he's a man with gravitas. You're keenly aware of interesting people around you, so surely he's someone you would be drawn to."

"In a fangirling sense, perhaps, but that has nothing to do with love! Besides, the one I fangirl over most of all is you, Lord Simeon."

"But there are so many charming men around you who are full of personality. Ambassador Nigel, Duke Silvestre, even His Majesty."

"Don't include every random person you can think of! How can you count the king, of all people? To say nothing of Duke Silvestre, who I'm certain was my natural enemy in a past life. He was a snake and I was a frog. He's the one person I *can't* fangirl over!"

"You're on a first-name basis with Prince Gracius."

Now this was nothing more than blatant sulking. After pausing a moment, I heaved a sigh. "That is nothing like you're suggesting, I can assure you. It was upsetting for him to be called by the formal name that marks him out as the crown prince. He was chased out of his homeland as a baby, and his parents died shortly afterwards, so he was raised with no memories of his roots. This means that being called the crown prince raises many complicated feelings in him. Inevitably, he's tired of all the expectations and demands placed on him. He didn't like that I, a foreigner with no connection to him—and no position of power—was using his formal name, so he asked me not to."

Lord Simeon didn't interrupt, so I continued.

"It wasn't a formal situation, so I agreed to his request, feeling it might provide him a modicum of relief. Naturally, I couldn't expect him to call me by a formal name when I was using his first name, so I asked him to do the same. There was no other motive."

I slipped out of Lord Simeon's arms and moved to his left side. Gently, I pulled on his arms and asked him to lie down. Reluctantly, he did so. Adjusting his position only by touch, I rested his head on my legs. Though he tried to be polite and pull away, I pushed back to keep him there. With him using my lap as a makeshift pillow, I stroked his wet hair.

"I appreciate you sharing your feelings so honestly, but I don't remotely understand why you're so critical of yourself," I said. "You're such an incredible person."

"I'm merely determined for you to continue feeling that way. If you were disappointed in me, I would never recover from it."

My goodness! So adorable! I came perilously close to exclaiming this out loud, but I just managed to hold it in. *Honestly, though, what is wrong with him? It's cute, but it's ridiculous! He's far too serious and far harder on himself than necessary. Honestly, this man's biggest strength and biggest weakness are two sides of the same coin. No matter how many times I tell him to relax, it seems to be completely impossible for him.*

What a vexing, delightful person.

"I've told you before that it's not only your dashing and impressive qualities that I love, but your flaws and awkwardness as well," I said. "For you to disappoint me, you'd have to suddenly turn into a womanizer with a mistress around every corner, or selfishly stain your hands with evil deeds and betray everyone around you."

"I would never become a womanizer."

"I know. It's less that you wouldn't, in fact, and more that you couldn't. If you were the kind of person who could do that, you wouldn't be tormenting yourself like this."

He had nothing to say to that.

Even though Lord Simeon was being so serious that it didn't feel right to make fun, I couldn't keep the laughter from my lips. Chuckling, I kept stroking Lord Simeon's hair. "It's all topsy-turvy. I should be the one worrying about this sort of thing. Wives being ignored by husbands who get bored with them, and new lovers who take the wife's place, aren't common only in stories, but in the real world too. Considering that I'm a wife with no particular beauty or other merits, it wouldn't at all be strange for me to be promptly discarded."

"Don't be ridiculous. You have more merits than I can count. I don't mean superficial details like your appearance, but your inner beauty and wisdom, your kindness and bravery. That you approach every situation with a cheerful optimism that spreads to those around you and makes them feel happy as well. I can name no other woman as marvelous as you. How could I ever get bored of you when I love you so much?"

This reply was so fervent that it gave me a ticklish sense of embarrassment. My expression softened more and more. *My goodness, this is clearly the bias that comes from seeing me through a lover's eyes! He can't expect everyone else to agree with all this. That's fine, though. Lord Simeon's words make me happier than praise from anyone else.*

"You always make your feelings toward me so clear," I replied. "You honestly have nothing to worry about. Thank you. I love you too."

I know how much my husband loves me. Hearing him say it, and feeling his kind gaze upon me, makes me feel an unstoppable surge of joy from deep in my heart. Does he really not understand that? No matter how much someone might intrigue me as a fangirl, it has nothing to do with my romantic feelings for my husband.

Since he didn't say anything, I raised another point that had been on my mind. "I'm certain you've been concerned about this as well, so I'd like to state for the record that I understand I can't demand any key information related to your missions. I accept this as a matter of course, and I have every intention of respecting your need for confidentiality. Perhaps on occasion I might eavesdrop a little if my curiosity gets the better of me, but if you catch me and give me a

talking to, I accept that it's my fault. It doesn't mean I'm dissatisfied with you."

He still didn't interject.

"When we argued about this before, I wasn't even objecting to the fact that you had to keep secrets. What I couldn't accept was that right from the start, you didn't even try to see my point of view. All you had to say was 'My apologies, but I just can't tell you. I hope you can understand.' Then I wouldn't have even gotten annoyed."

We'd once had a big enough quarrel along these lines that he'd even suggested breaking off the engagement. I thought we'd settled the matter completely back then, but apparently it still wasn't quite enough.

"We covered all of this, and you gave an apology in advance to last for our entire lives. In return, I said that I would never ask you to apologize for this ever again. I haven't forgotten any of this. I'm not merely putting up with the situation—I fully accept it."

"Really?" he said after a moment. "Are you sure you're not simply keeping your frustration bottled up?"

"I don't have the willpower for that. I could hold it in for a while, but forever would be an impossible challenge."

In the process of tormenting himself, Lord Simeon had imagined me as a long-suffering wife. *Does he really not notice anything odd about that after all the arguments we've had so far?*

"Lord Simeon, do you remember our wedding ceremony?" I asked, continuing to stroke my beloved's hair. "The priest told us that from now on, we had to honor, cherish, and help each other. That in our new life together, we should support one another as husband and wife."

"He did indeed," Lord Simeon replied after a moment.

"You don't need to present a facade of perfection in front of me. If you don't let go occasionally, you'll drive yourself mad. People can't work so hard for so long. I may not be as dependable as you are, but I want to support you as well."

Another silent moment passed before I went on.

“Having said that, I’m sure you’ll get anxious again before too long. That’s your personality, and I understand that. People can’t easily change their innate nature. So, next time you start to feel this way, please tell me about it rather than struggling with it alone. I’ll reassure you as many times as you need. However much you criticize yourself, I’ll be there to set you right every time. I’ll make every fiber of your being understand that both my love and my fangirl fascination are eternal.”

Lord Simeon lifted his head and shifted out of my lap. I tried to pull him back, but instead, he pulled at my arms, drawing me down to lie beside him. Next to one another on the musty floor, we embraced and shared our warmth.

Though it was too dark to see, I couldn’t be scared in his arms. Lord Simeon’s heartbeat and breathing were right there next to me, and nothing could ever hearten me as much as that. Even while cold, wet, and fearful of our pursuers, I was happy deep in my soul.

“Is it my imagination, or is the rain dying down slightly?”

“It sounds like it, yes,” Lord Simeon replied. “I’m sure it will have ceased by morning.”

His voice sounded somewhat drowsy, as though he’d finally calmed down enough to rest properly. I was tired as well. With the tension dissipated, fatigue came rapidly to me as well. Almost as soon as I was lying down, my eyelids began to droop.

“We’re almost through the mountains,” he said. “When it’s light, we can set out for the nearby farmlands right away. You’ll only need to endure a little longer.”

“Yes, let’s set off at first light,” I murmured. “I bet His Highness and the others are worried.”

“Undoubtedly. I must reunite with them quickly to apologize for my ineptitude.”

Lord Simeon had returned to his characteristic attitude. Smiling, I started to doze off. Gentle kisses came down upon my cheeks, my forehead, and my lips.

“Good night, Marielle...and thank you.” In a faint whisper, he added, “You

mean everything to me.”

I wanted to reply that he meant everything to me as well, but I couldn't even move my lips anymore. *He must have said it assuming that I'd already fallen asleep. Well, even though I can't answer, I heard every word. I won't have forgotten it by morning. I'll definitely say it back to you as soon as I've said good morning!*

My consciousness melted away. As we sheltered from the rain, nothing disturbed the peace of the unfolding night. Letting the brief respite envelop us, we waited until the time we would awaken.

I didn't know how long I had been asleep. Shivering, I momentarily didn't understand where I was. Questions flooded my mind: why was it so cold, and why was it so hard underneath me? When my hands sought the duvet and found only the rough, cruel floor, I remembered the events of last night.

Yawning, I opened my eyes and took a hazy glance around. There was no sound of rain anymore. The wind had died down as well. This sent a wave of relief washing over me. The next second, however, I noticed that the warmth that should have been next to me had disappeared.

“Lord Simeon? Where are you?”

I sat up and darted my head about. My vision was blurry. I remembered that my glasses had been in my pocket the whole time. When I got them out to check, I was glad to see I hadn't accidentally crushed them in my sleep. *Thank goodness. Even if they are badly bent, there's still a huge difference between having them and not.* I put them on and looked around again properly. Lord Simeon was nowhere to be seen in the small hut.

Had he gone outside, I wondered? Uneasy, I stood up. There was no way he would have intentionally left me there alone, but I was worried that something unforeseen might have happened.

Walking as softly as possible against the creaking floor, I went to the doorway. The door was ajar. It was possible that Lord Simeon had left it that way on purpose, deciding it was better not to keep opening and closing it when there was a risk of it falling off at the slightest touch. I slid through the gap and exited

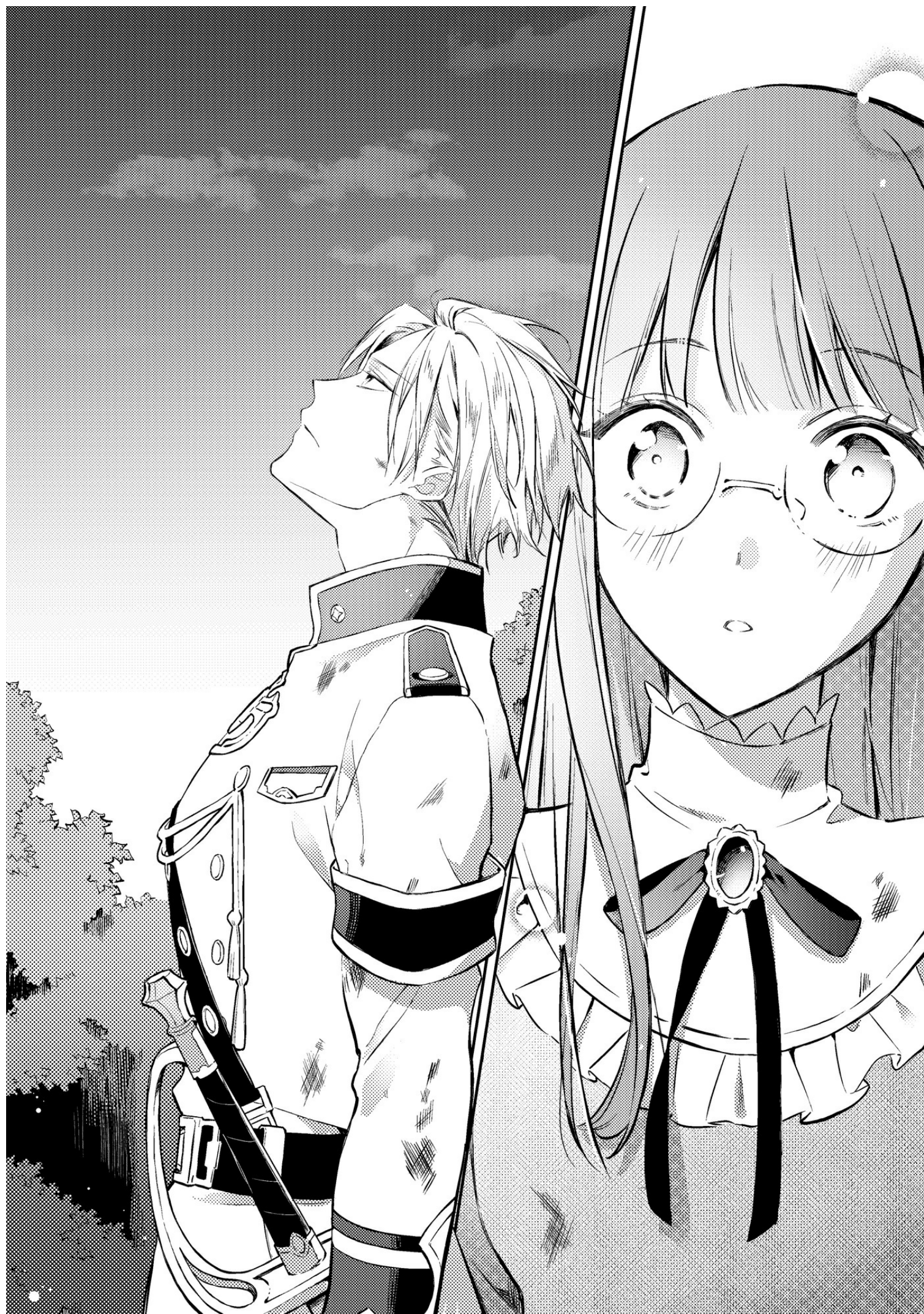
the hut.

The world had thrown off the cloak of night. From the dim darkness, the surrounding trees and bushes were coming into view. The sky, halfway between blue and gray, held not a single cloud; I could tell it would be a clear day. Although I couldn't see them from deep in the woods, the edges of the mountains were no doubt highlighted with a faint golden outline as the sun began to rise. Birds had awoken and started to chirp.

Lord Simeon was looking up at the sky. Seeing him standing still amid the forest at dawn, I gazed at him with quiet wonder. *My word, this man is beautiful.*

The resplendent royal guard's uniform was a shadow of its usual self, being so dirty and torn. His blond hair, typically akin to pale sunlight, was much the same. He'd run his fingers through it in an attempt to comb it, but it was still caked with mud. The pale skin of his handsome face was a mess of scratches.

Even so, he was beautiful. No matter what kind of horrible enemy came for him, he definitely wouldn't flinch, and even if humiliated, he would never falter. He stood tall like a white lily blooming with great dignity. A refined and majestic aura surrounded him.



Proud, tall, and dashing—that's my knight. When he turned his head to look at me, my heart raced. I spread out my arms and called out, "You mean everything to me!"

He frowned, confused.

Oops. I forgot to say "good morning" first. Since I'd decided I would definitely say that in the morning, it was naturally the first thing I thought of when I got up. *Well, never mind. All I did was switch the order around slightly.*

"Good morning," I added, walking over and standing by his side.

He looked slightly uncomfortable. His gaze wandering, he replied, "Ah, yes, indeed. Thank you—no, I mean, good morning."

He covered his mouth with his hand and looked away. Looking up at him, a broad smile spread across my face. *What a shame that it's still barely light. I wish I could see the color his face has turned.*

"How are you feeling?" I asked, concerned. "Can you move without too much difficulty?"

He wasn't holding his right side or looking pained to the same degree he had been yesterday. Broken bones couldn't heal overnight, though.

Returning to his usual self-possessed demeanor, he nodded.

"Yes, I'm feeling better. As long as I avoid straining too much, it's no problem."

"In Simeonese, 'Yes, I'm feeling better' translates to 'It hurts but I'll grin and bear it,' no?"

"I don't use my own unique language, and if I did, it certainly wouldn't be as twisted as that. I truly am feeling all right."

He looked up at the sky again. "It looks like it's cleared up. What do you think?"

"Yes, the weather's looking much better. Yesterday's wind must have blown the rain clouds away. When the sun comes up, I'll finally be able to see the clear autumn sky I've been hoping for."

“Excellent.” He turned his gaze back to me and smiled. “I’m sure you’re exhausted, but can you keep going just a tiny bit longer?”

“Of course. It’s light enough to see my feet already, and it will only keep getting lighter as we walk, won’t it? If we wait here too long, the Silver Fox might hunt us down. We should set out quickly.”

Lord Simeon met my enthusiastic reply with an emphatic nod of his own.

“Which way do we go, though?” I asked. In spite of my eagerness, I had no idea. The hut would ideally have been on a path, but since it hadn’t been used for so long, whatever path had once been there had long since been covered up by grass.

Lord Simeon looked out across the surrounding area. “That is a good question. The sun is rising from that side, so...”

He contemplated which direction this put the city. I also had a rough sense of where the city might be relative to us, but it was important to choose the shortest possible route if we could.

Just then, a sound came from a nearby thicket. I jumped with a start. Instantly, Lord Simeon moved in front to cover me and drew his saber.

We held our breath, fearing our foe had found us. However, what appeared was not a person, but a large animal.

“Oh, it’s a deer,” I remarked.

The creature gracefully turned its head and looked at us with its large eyes. Its face remained entirely composed. I could almost see it wondering who we were, though nonchalantly, without any concern. Even with people right in front of it, it showed no sign of any fear, emerging fully from the bushes and walking past us in a leisurely manner. Another appeared, following it. Then another, and another, and another.

“How many of them are there?”

Making its way deeper into the mountains, the leader of the group disappeared into another thicket. Seeing the line of deer bobbing past him, Lord Simeon was slightly flustered as well. “There certainly are a lot of them.”

“They’re awfully bold. They didn’t care about our presence at all. Are they not afraid of people?”

Stunned, I watched their white tails disappear into the bushes, six of them in total.

“They live in groups like that, don’t they? Are they a family, or simply neighborhood friends?”

“They were all females and children, so perhaps they are related by blood.”

“Now that you mention it, none of them had antlers. Is there no place for a father in the deer household?”

“Don’t phrase it in such a sad way, please.”

Recovering himself, Lord Simeon looked around again. I pulled myself together again, and then cried out, “Oh!”

“What is it?”

“Lord Simeon, those deer just now—they came from that way, didn’t they?” I pointed to the thicket the deer had emerged from.

“Yes,” replied Lord Simeon, somewhat bewildered.

“And they were going deeper into the mountains. That means the farmlands, and the city, must be beyond that thicket!”

Lord Simeon responded to my confident assertion by blinking. “Why?”

I chuckled proudly. “I was told something interesting over dinner when we were staying with House Lespinasse. To us, deer may be cute animals, but for the people whose livelihood is agriculture, they’re pests that ravage the fields.”

He made a noncommittal sound. “Hmm.”

“Apparently they raid the crops every day. We were served venison directly after that, so I had some complicated thoughts. It was delicious, though.”

“I’d argue it’s a good thing that rather than simply eradicating them, they use them for food so that their lives aren’t wasted.”

“Yes. Actually, that reminds me that I’m incredibly hungry.” I got the remaining rock candy out and shared it. “Here, let’s both have some.”

Once again, Lord Simeon chewed and swallowed the sweets as quickly as he could.

“Anyway,” I continued, “I was told that the deer mainly visit the farmers’ fields at dusk and dawn. That means the ones we saw a moment ago just came back from eating breakfast, and there are fields where they came from!”

Pointing again with a snap, I stated my conclusion in an assertive tone.

Silence fell for a moment, then Lord Simeon uttered, “I doubt the owners of those fields are especially happy about their crops being ravaged by deer every day.”

“True. Although the deer aren’t doing it out of malice.”

Lord Simeon headed over to the thicket the deer had come from and pushed aside some of the thick undergrowth. “It doesn’t look impossible to traverse.”

As I peered in from behind him, he turned his head slightly and smiled. “As far as we know, it’s only used by animals, so I don’t know how comfortable it will be for us. Still, if your reasoning holds, this should be the most direct route.”

“Shall we go a different way?”

“No, let’s take a gamble on the Ortan guardian deity.”

Of course—deer, like the crest of the Ortan royal family. I smiled at his reference to the comment I’d made about this in the graveyard.

He took my hand just as he had done the day before. I gave a firm nod. It made me happy that he trusted me. Hand in hand, we entered the thicket.

Struggling against branches and leaves that scratched our faces and got tangled in our hair, we soldiered on. *I’m impressed that those deer could get through here so easily.* In an effort to shield me as much as he could, Lord Simeon went in front and forcefully cleared the path. Even more cuts and grazes joined the ones already on his face.

Wanting to make it easier on him, I pushed through as hard as I could as well so that we could be out of there as soon as possible. My skirt kept getting caught, so to avoid the annoyance, I pulled it up and gripped it tightly with one hand. I was definitely in no state to be seen. *I dearly hope Lord Simeon doesn’t*

turn around. No matter how much of an emergency situation it is, I don't want the one I love to see me looking like this. Even I have some modesty! Once again I was walking around with my undergarments fully exposed. However, our strenuous efforts meant we made it through the thicket faster than expected.

"We did it!" Dropping my skirt, I let out a cry of joy. In front of us, an open landscape unfurled. We could see fields. There was a road too, and beyond that were houses.

We were already on the outskirts of Sans-Ravel. The familiar scenery lifted my spirits. "If we continue straight along that road, we'll reach Sans-Ravel!"

"Yes. You did very well." Lord Simeon smiled as well. Embracing me, he stroked my disheveled face. "Let's find a house where we can ask for some food and water. A search party has probably been sent out by now as well."

"Hooray!"

Now that we weren't wandering lost in the mountains, but were on the way back to civilization, I was feeling significantly more cheerful. *We're on the final stretch now.* I mustered up all the energy I had left and started walking.

Once we were on level ground with no dense foliage, it was significantly easier to walk. However, this made it impossible to stay hidden, leaving us exposed and vulnerable. It was also very bright, and not only because we were no longer up in the mountains. The edges of the peaks were shining ever more dazzlingly by the moment. The morning sun shone upon the road as we hurried along, cautiously keeping watch for enemies.

We must go as quickly as we can—just long enough to get to a house. If they can even lend us a horse, we'll reach the city in no time. Our flight is almost over.

Out of breath, I kept pushing myself on. Then, suddenly, I saw movement farther along the road. If I wasn't mistaken, there were people there. I squinted to try and see, but they were too far away to make out clearly.

"What's the matter?" asked Lord Simeon.

"I think I see people along the road. They're too far away for me to be sure, but it looks like quite a large group."

Holding up the glasses as they tried to slip down my face, I strained my eyes. Lord Simeon, who had lost his glasses, probably couldn't see anything yet. He stopped walking, a troubled expression on his face. "It's a question of who they are, isn't it?"

"Could it be the enemy?"

"We shall see." He looked around in all directions and his eyes fell on a nearby storage shed. "For now, let's hide in there and keep watch. Since they're coming from the direction of the city, it could be our allies. If so, we should regroup with them as soon as possible."

"Yes!"

And if they were our enemies, we had to stay hidden and let them go by. That was all we could do. No matter how skilled Lord Simeon was, he couldn't take on a whole group all by himself. We hurried over to the tool storage shed, which stood beside the nearest field. The door wasn't locked, so with a silent apology, we let ourselves in. Thankfully, the window faced the direction of the road. From there, we peered out. The distant group appeared to be coming our way. Gradually the figures grew larger and I could confirm that they were indeed people. They appeared to be on horseback.

"It looks like they're wearing white uniforms."

"Any other distinguishing characteristics?"

"Let me see..."

Ugh, I wish my eyesight were better. When I was a child I could see such a long way without glasses. It's so frustrating!

My poor eyesight didn't matter for long, though, as they were rapidly drawing nearer. Soon it was clear that some members of the party were dressed in white and others in a darker shade. *A muted green, I believe. Yes, I'm sure of it! Those are the uniforms of the Lagrangian royal guards and army!*

"They're our allies!" I pulled away from the window. "It's the search party! Let's go!"

"Marielle, wait!"

I immediately flung the door open and ran out. It wouldn't do to let them gallop past without seeing us. Lord Simeon followed behind me and we both returned to the road.

By now, even my last doubts had faded. They had closed the distance enough that I could clearly make out the uniforms. I waved my hands broadly to try and get their attention. They appeared to notice us too; I could faintly hear their excited voices in the distance. Filled with joy, I started running toward them.

That instant, a single gunshot rang out behind me.

A sneak attack. The enemy's here as well!

As that thought flashed through my mind, I rushed to turn around. There before my eyes, I saw Lord Simeon lying on the ground, face down. For a second, my mind couldn't follow what was happening. Sound disappeared from the world, and everything else disappeared. His already stained white uniform had a fresh, vivid patch of red growing ever larger.

"Oh... No... Nooooooooo!" I screamed and ran over to him. "Lord Simeon!"

He wasn't moving. He showed no response at all when I called his name. *Where was he shot?! I pressed at the point the blood was spreading from. The left side of his abdomen. What happened? Did the bullet pass straight through, or is it still in his body?*

"Lord Simeon! Lord Simeon! Lord—"

My breath caught in my throat. There were footsteps coming nearer.

"Excellent work, escaping through the mountains like animals."

Where had he been hiding? How long had he been following us?

The Silver Fox was laughing with supreme delight. He appeared before us once more, a pistol in his hand.

"I must say, it was quite a pain that you two were so inseparable. I didn't want to accidentally shoot you instead. Sadly, my weapon isn't quite as accurate as his. Thank you for finally splitting up. It was very helpful indeed."

Confronting me with the harsh truth as I trembled, the Silver Fox looked along the road. Even though his foes were approaching, he showed no sign of panic.

His allies appeared from behind him as well.

“We let Prince Gracius slip out of our grasp, but it will be enough to capture you, and...yes, that pistol. If I return home with the Holy Crown and an example of the latest technology as souvenirs, that will be more than adequate.”

I clenched my jaw.

Gunshots resounded. The Silver Fox’s men had opened fire to push back the approaching royal guards. A few shots came from the latter, but they soon stopped. The reason was clear. They were worried about catching us in the crossfire.

The Silver Fox stood right next to me and looked down. “I hit his side, I see. Dear oh dear, this thing just can’t aim accurately at a distance.” He casually aimed the muzzle at Lord Simeon. “I’d like to leave him with a festering wound that won’t kill him quickly: the humiliation of you being taken from him. However, letting him live may be unwise, as I don’t know what he might do in future. Better to remove any risk.”

I stood in front of the gun and spread out my arms to cover Lord Simeon. Looking up at the Silver Fox, I said, “I...I already told you. If you kill him, I’ll die too. I will never, ever tell you where the crown is hidden!”

Annoyance and derision appeared on his face. “What’s the point in dying for a man who can’t even keep you safe? He’s pathetic. Surely he doesn’t even matter anymore.”

With his free hand, he grabbed my arm. As he tried to pull me toward him, the gun’s aim was momentarily diverted away from Lord Simeon.

At that moment, Lord Simeon moved. He took a rock he was grasping in his hand and threw it at the Silver Fox. It struck hard, close to his eye, and sent him reeling.

He let go of my arm, crying out in pain and anger. He aimed and fired again. The bullet whooshed past and scattered some strands of Lord Simeon’s hair.

Powering through the pain, Lord Simeon leapt up. The blade of the saber gleamed. The Silver Fox dodged his strike only by a whisker. As he jumped away, Lord Simeon followed hot on his heels.

“You obstinate cur!” the Silver Fox bellowed.

“I’ll never let you defeat me! I can and *will* protect her!”

Deep resentment bubbled in Lord Simeon’s howling voice. Another bullet, fired at close range, grazed his shoulder, but he ignored this and took an unflinching step forward. The blade swooped up and sliced through the Silver Fox’s arm.

The Silver Fox let out a ragged scream like that of a wounded beast. The hand fell to the ground, still clutching the gun, taking a large amount of the arm with it.

Lord Simeon didn’t wait to deliver a merciless additional blow. With a swift kick, he sent the man’s slender body slamming to the ground. Then he turned, wrapped an arm around me, and fled from the battlefield.

“Fire!” he shouted, projecting clearly. There was no doubt that the order reached his men. They were used to hearing it from their daily training and missions, and they obeyed at once. The sounds of the counterfire echoed simultaneously.

We moved even farther away to avoid getting hit. Lord Simeon’s movements were strong and true. Even with blood spreading from his shoulder and his side, he did not waver at all.

“Lord Simeon, are you all right?”

“Don’t worry. Both of them only grazed me, just like last time.”

His smile soothed me. Now my emotions, which had entered a sort of paralyzed state, returned. Tears welled up and I began to sob convulsively. He leaned down and gently kissed my face.

“Bah,” came a carefree voice from above. “You should have stayed flat on the ground.”

Surprised, I looked up and saw Lutin sitting on the roof of the shed. He met my eyes and smiled, then jumped down in an agile motion, his overcoat spreading out behind him like wings.

“Just think,” he continued, walking toward us with his typical easygoing

attitude on display. “If I’d swooped in to save the day, Marielle would have instantly fallen for me. Why must you be so doggedly persistent?”

Beside me, Lord Simeon gave a derisive snort. “You have no shame, do you?” He put an arm around my shoulder and looked back at Lutin. His typically displeased response was mixed with a hint of pride. “I’m the one who protects Marielle. Whatever happens, I’ll keep her safe right up until the end. Your assistance is neither wanted nor needed.”

“Interesting that you would say that, considering that it wasn’t an act when you collapsed.” Lutin’s eyes held a glint of amusement.

The senseless war of words had begun again. I laughed languidly as my shoulders slumped.

A voice called out, “Vice Captain!”

Alain was approaching. More of our allies were running behind him as well. I couldn’t hear gunshots anymore. It appeared that the Ortan operatives had largely been subdued, and the remainder were escaping.

Lord Simeon stopped arguing with Lutin and went to meet with his subordinates. As he walked off, the just-risen sun overlapped behind him, making a dazzling white crown shine radiantly atop his blond hair.



Chapter Fourteen

When Prince Gracius first arrived at the church, it was raining heavily, and he'd been wandering for two days with virtually no food and water. He wasn't used to strenuous activity to begin with, so by that point he was already at his limit physically and mentally.

That was when he happened upon the graveyard behind the church. Knowing that he couldn't go on any longer, resigned to his imminent collapse and perhaps even death, he was determined that the Holy Crown of Lorencio be preserved. As he sought a hiding place, something caught his eye: a collection of brilliant white flowers.

These white flowers surrounding one of the gravestones indicated that a child had recently been buried there. The prince realized that a new grave was exactly what he needed. The earth would still be soft. Then he also noticed the storage shed in the church garden. By the dim light shining from the church, he retrieved a shovel from the shed and dug up the top layer of earth. The sound of the falling rain hid his solitary activity.

With an apology to the young soul whose rest he was disturbing, he prayed that the crown might be protected. This treasure was more vital to the Ortan people than the royal bloodline itself. He asked that it be kept safely here for the time being in the hope that it could someday be passed into the hands of a worthy successor.

Looking down at the case that had been dug up, he told us that he remembered everything now.

"Yes, that's right. I buried it here. Right here." He knelt down in front of the grave, put a hand on his heart and bowed his head deeply. "I'm so sorry. You took good care of it for me. Thank you."

Even after the earth was dug up and then replaced by an inexperienced hand, the heavy rain hadn't washed it away, and the Holy Crown had remained hidden. Perhaps it was the divine protection of a guardian deity after all, or

perhaps the young soul had heard his prayer. The child's parents, who had given their permission to uncover the crown upon hearing the Prince's story, looked on, moved to tears.

The priest said another prayer and I placed a bouquet of white flowers on the grave. Gentle sunlight shone down around us.

Prince Gracius went over to Prince Severin, who had done so much for him, and lowered his head. "I'm sorry for all the fuss I've caused."

"You came out of this in one piece, and we have the crown back as well. All of the hullabaloo was thoroughly worth it in my book. On that note, have you made up your mind?"

Prince Gracius looked up. His blue eyes still held hints of fragility and uncertainty, but he wasn't going to run away anymore. He looked back at His Highness with a resolute gaze. "I don't know exactly how to proceed. When we get to Sans-Terre, I'd like to stay put for a while and take the time to consider everything."

"I see." His Highness smiled and offered his hand out to Prince Gracius. "Capital! In that case, I suspect we shall be seeing a great deal of each other—now and in the future. I rather hope we can be friends, Lord Lucio!"

I gathered that Prince Gracius had at some point followed my suggestion and opened up to His Highness. Rather than hiding his feelings, he had sought the opinion of someone who was also a crown prince, but slightly older and more experienced in the position. I didn't know the full details of what they had discussed or how His Highness had responded, but I could sense that now there was more than mere formality between the two of them. The beginnings of a camaraderie were visible.

Until the war ended and the situation in Orta was calmer, Prince Gracius was to be a guest at Ventvert Palace. I could only imagine the ripples this would cause in high society. *I'm sure he'll get annoyed at being the talk of the town, but there is a certain joy to be found in it as well. I'll have to teach him all about it at some point.*

Enjoying life is the way to live it to its fullest. Whatever the circumstances, looking at them in a new light gives you a different perspective. If he finds a way

to enjoy his life, to relish the opportunities, I know he'll become stronger. I have the feeling he'll be a great king.

While I stood and watched at a polite distance, Lutin came over, accompanied by Dario. I noticed that Dario was carrying bags in both hands.

"Are you going back to Lavia?" I asked.

"Yes," Lutin replied. "There's no need for us here anymore. Swarms of additional troops have arrived, and the crown has been found already. The rest is up to Lagrange, so I shall leave it in Prince Severin's capable hands."

"That makes sense."

Lord Simeon was not present, as he was recovering from his gunshot wounds and broken ribs. The doctor had insisted that he rest, and despite his eagerness to be up and about regardless, His Highness had admonished him and ordered that he stay put. Lord Noel was keeping watch to ensure he didn't quietly sneak out, and his parents were still there as well. This meant that Lord Simeon was forced to resign himself—and that I could leave him in bed without too much worry.

Part of me was glad that he wasn't here right now, as that would have precluded speaking to Lutin in too friendly a manner. With a silent apology to my husband, I said, "I want to thank you for everything you've done. I heard that after we were separated, you deliberately showed yourself and made the enemy think they'd found the real Prince Gracius. Despite the risk of being shot, you drew all their attention. It's all thanks to you that we were able to escape. The rock candy you gave me unexpectedly came in handy as well. I'm grateful to you from the bottom of my heart."

Lutin's eyebrows shot up. For a moment he looked as though he would reply with one of his usual ironic remarks, but he thought better of it and closed his mouth. In a rare sight, his cheeks flushed as if he was embarrassed.

"Well, it was my mission. I don't think you particularly need to thank me for it."

"It's undeniable that you saved us, though. Surely it's not so odd that I'd be glad about that and want to tell you so."

He paused. “I believe this is the first time you’ve ever shown me a smile like that.”

“Oh, maybe.”

“During the House Pautrier incident, it wasn’t me you were showing favor to, but ‘Cedric.’ Since learning who I really am, all you’ve done is glare at me and call me a scoundrel and a thief.”

He wasn’t joking. Lutin himself seemed lost as to how he should respond to my words. After all his ardent attempts at wooing me, now that I had complimented him, he didn’t know how to take it.

What an odd man. Could it be that he hasn’t had much experience with this sort of thing? He always hides behind a smile and a cynical remark, never showing his true feelings. I can’t ever be sure how serious his seductive lines are either. I thought all this was intentional, but perhaps he really doesn’t know any other way to relate to people. Maybe he’s hardly ever had anyone show him genuine favor, so he doesn’t know how to take it or express his own feelings in return.

I wonder how he’s treated by his master, Prince Liberto. Perhaps it’s purely a working relationship and nothing more?

“I don’t glare at you all the time. Only when you’re teasing Lord Simeon and committing misdeeds. Otherwise I talk to you normally—at least, as far as I’m aware. I smiled when we parted last time, didn’t I?”

“So the only time I can get a smile from you is when we’re parting? How tragic.”

“It wasn’t a smile to say that I was happy to part from you, but filled with the anticipation of seeing you again. Everyone smiles when they say goodbye but are looking forward to seeing each other again. It’s like a promise to spend another wonderful occasion together in the future.”

His blue eyes looked straight back at me. Very slightly, just the tiniest bit, I felt a tingle in my heart. Naturally, my heart belongs to Lord Simeon. I would never do anything to betray him. But, at that moment, I felt a sudden urge to apologize to my husband.

“You’re looking forward to seeing me again?” he replied.

“You still haven’t told me your real name, after all. Didn’t you promise me?”

Returning to his typically sardonic expression, Lutin shrugged. “I don’t remember promising a thing. It was your own insistence, nothing more.”

“So you won’t tell me?”

He considered, then said, “Not yet.”

His handsome face drew closer to mine. I adopted a defensive posture, and Lutin froze for a second, then changed his approach and kissed my cheek.

“That way you’ll always be thinking about me. It will play on your mind. You’ll think about me night and day, until you can’t sleep anymore and eventually realize that you love me.”

“No I won’t.”

Laughing loudly, Lutin turned around. Without looking back, he set off walking and lifted his hands in the air. “If I’ve told you once, I’ve told you a thousand times: Lavian men are full of passion. A few setbacks aren’t enough to make us give up. Before too long, I’m confident that my charms will win you over.”

Dario bowed too and followed after Lutin. I watched them leave with a wry smile. I wasn’t blind to his charms. Even wicked men could hold plenty of appeal to women. *And how unfair of him to show the cracks in his armor and reveal that he’s inexperienced with affection in spite of the impression he gives! How dare he, frankly!*

Still, I belonged to Lord Simeon. I couldn’t love anyone else. No matter how many lines Lutin used on me, my answer would always be the same. *Sorry, Lutin.*

I set out toward the manor where my beloved awaited. Birds were flying across the vast autumn sky.

After that, no further incidents occurred in the Maigne region, and everyone returned safely to Sans-Terre. As planned, Prince Gracius became a guest of the royal palace and was placed under protection. His presence hadn’t been

publicly announced yet, but those with an ear to the ground had heard about it, and rumors were spreading.

Regarding the war, I wasn't being given detailed updates, of course. Every newspaper was proclaiming our overwhelming victory, but the truth was that it hadn't yet fully concluded, and I was concerned and curious as to the current state of affairs.

A few days after we got home, I paid a visit to the palace to meet with a friend I hadn't seen in a while.

"Falling off a cliff? Being shot at?" she remarked, not even hiding her exasperated reaction. "You never change, do you? You're always getting mixed up in such ridiculous events. Are you certain that you're not cursed?"

Julianne sat across from me in a small room used for tea parties. In order to marry His Highness, she had become Duke Silvestre's adopted daughter and undergone training to make her a suitable princess. As a result, she had a very different air about her than I was used to. Her exquisite hair and makeup were only the beginning. Her every gesture while drinking tea had become markedly more refined.

When she opened her mouth, however, she was as scathing as ever. The worry hidden behind her merciless words was also present and correct.

"Well, excuse me! I didn't ask for any of this. I was asked to help while it was already in motion. Besides, it was Lord Simeon who was actually shot, not me."

"How is he recovering?"

"He keeps insisting it's nothing serious. I do wish he would take more time to recuperate."

Lord Simeon had only been a good boy and stayed in bed until we made our return journey. Once we were back, he returned to his usual habits and went straight back to work. Today he'd also left the house rather early, mentioning that there was a lot to deal with in the aftermath of everything that had happened.

I continued, "He says that broken bones aren't like an illness. After being given the appropriate treatment, he can carry on with his daily activities as long

as he doesn't strain himself too much. That may be true, but couldn't he rest for a few days at least?"

"That sounds very much like Lord Simeon."

To be fair, the circumstances didn't necessarily permit him to stay on the sidelines. As worried as I was for his well-being, there wasn't much I could do. Still, I had told Alain to make him rest by force if necessary if he started pushing himself too hard.

For one day only, Julianne had been released from her marriage training and could fly free. As we continued to enthusiastically discuss recent events, His Highness arrived.

He came running, a picture of joy. In order to have this time with her, he'd put in a lot of effort to square away all his work.

"Julianne! I'm so sorry to have kept you waiting!"

She stood and curtsied. In an instant, her cheeks flushed. "Good work getting everything done." She hesitated a moment. "I'm sorry for declining your invitation the other day. I know you've been very keen to see me."

Taking no notice of my presence, His Highness made a beeline straight for Julianne's side and took her hand. "Oh, pish posh. You've been exhausted with everything on your plate, of course. I wasn't thinking enough about your needs."

"No," she murmured, "that wasn't the reason, actually. I'm sorry. I had a pimple, you see. My face was in no fit state to be seen, so I couldn't meet you."

All of a sudden, Julianne was every bit the shy maiden. *She must really be passionately in love.*

"Is that so? That must be the result of this stress as well, I'd wager. I hardly think you'd have been unfit to be seen, though. On your face, I've no doubt even a pimple would be simply adorable."

"It certainly was not. It was hideous. I was desperate for it to go away."

"Whereabouts was it?" He came closer, peering at her face.

"Please don't ask me that. Honestly!"

Her cheeks got even redder and she became slightly angry. Even this reaction made His Highness happy, however.

It was fine that he was in such a good mood, but bearing witness to this did make me uncomfortable. Since even my best friend appeared to have forgotten I was even there, I decided it was best to quietly slip away. Julianne's real reason for coming to the palace was to see him, and seeing me as well was only a bonus, but I did wish I'd gotten to speak to her a little longer, since I'd been missing her too. *Hmph.*

Feeling rather sullen, I turned to leave. When I did, however, my eyes landed on the man who had entered behind His Highness.

"Oh, Lord Lucio. Good day."

It was Prince Gracius, looking far more buoyant than before in both his face and his mannerisms. Seeing me, he greeted me with a smile. "Hello, Marielle!"

He was accompanied by Isaac and some royal guards charged with escorting him. Among these men was Lord Simeon, who cast me a light glance and nodded before silently standing by the doorway.

"When I heard that you were here, I asked if I could come along," said the prince. "I wanted to thank you properly. You helped me so much. I'm incredibly grateful."

The surly attitude of our first encounter was a distant memory by now. His smile was calm and gentle, and as he bowed gracefully to me with a hand on his heart, he embodied a princely charm that was different from Prince Severin's.

"Your words give me too much credit," I replied. "I didn't do anything nearly that important."

"You definitely did. You were in a lot of danger too. I can't thank you enough."

His passionate expression of gratitude made me blush slightly. "The soldiers are the ones to thank for that part."

"I've thanked them too, of course. But I had to say the same to you. I've spent a long time thinking about what you told me. As long as I can remember, I've never wanted to be a king, but I was never thinking about what I'd be able to do

in the role. I saw it as me being nothing but a puppet.”

Prince Severin glanced our way. Internally, I was anxious as to whether it was all right to let this conversation go on, but since no one made a move to stop it, I silently carried on listening.

“But looking back, there was nothing else I wanted to do. I was truly empty inside. Despite how unsatisfied I was with my lot in life, I also made no effort to change it. I know it was wrong to run away, but doing that was the first time I’d ever acted of my own volition.”

I wasn’t sure what I could say. “Indeed,” I offered.

Prince Gracius looked over at Isaac a little awkwardly, but the man smiled back at him. The prince continued, “Apparently my father wasn’t a very good king. Neither were the generations before that. We’ve had a lot of rulers who didn’t think about their people at all. That’s why the royal family was hated and ultimately driven out. I didn’t think anyone would be happy for me to return, given that I inherited that bloodline. However, if I have to take the throne, I want to try to be a king the people will like. That would be fulfilling.”

With some halting shyness, he carried on, determined.

“I know I won’t be accepted all that easily. I have to be prepared to face a backlash. One day, though, I want to be beloved the way Prince Severin is. Working hard to achieve that would be the kind of ‘worthwhile endeavor’ you were talking about, I think.”

The reason for his new sunnier disposition and clear resolve was, perhaps, that he had found the path inside himself. The lost child, ruled by his pain and unsure where to turn, was gone now.

He added, “Orta’s been in a state of unrest for a long time now. Everyone is exhausted. I’m not the only one who has suffered—the entire populace has too. If I can contain that chaos like Lorencio I did, and make Orta into a stable nation, people will be glad to say they were born in Orta. To bring forth that future, I have to learn everything I can while I’m here.”

This was a declaration that the path he’d found wasn’t one of escape, but one where he could accept his own position. I smiled and gave a firm nod.

I'm certain he'll be fine. As he starts to walk along his path, he'll make friends and receive plenty of assistance. A whole world will unfold before him that he couldn't see while he was crouching in place.

"That sounds wonderful," I told him.

"Easier said than done, of course!" He laughed bashfully.

I took his hand. "It will be a grand project that will take your entire life. Perhaps that's just the kind of grand adventure a gentleman's life should be. Even if it doesn't go exactly as you hope, your efforts will no doubt leave an impact. That will be the start of a road that leads to the next generation and beyond. As it goes on, it will leave behind a bountiful domain full of people with smiles on their faces. I'll be watching your noble footsteps and cheering you on with all I have, Lord Lucio."

I kneeled and kissed the hand he presented. Even though he wasn't wearing the crown yet, this man was a fine king already. After all, he'd said it was a worthwhile endeavor to do everything he could for his people. One day everyone in Orta would surely accept him.

When I released his hand and stood, he said, "Thank you." He sounded happy. Then his face took on a mischievous glint. "What a shame, though. If you weren't already married, I'd have asked you to join me in my great project."

"Oh my!"

Laughing at his joke, I turned my head to Lord Simeon, chiding him with my gaze as he glared with a deeply furrowed brow. *Don't overreact to something so small!*

"It's a remarkable honor that you would say that, but I've already found a project that will take up my entire life."

"Being an earl's wife, I suppose."

Yes. That and pursuing my fangirl interests!

I'm still excited about the idea of a young wife who bounces back in the face of adversity, but it would also be wonderful to write a story about a young king who has to forge a difficult path. No doubt a fated encounter with his future

princess is waiting for him. In fact, wouldn't it be ideal to combine the two? It would be a grand romance that starts from a marriage of convenience. At first their relationship is a cold one, but their shared political struggle helps it develop into real affection. Perfect! That's what I'll write next!

Of course, the king will be based on Prince Gracius. I wonder what sort of princess would suit him?

When Lord Simeon left to return to the Order's headquarters, I walked along the corridor beside him. He didn't say much, but he was in a sour mood without a doubt.

I heaved a soft sigh. "It was a light jest. Anyone would say that sort of thing. It's an empty compliment in the name of politeness."

Without even a glance my way, he replied in a prickly tone, "You're the only one who would see it that way."

I sensed that he wasn't too pleased about me having kissed the prince's hand either. *That's normal etiquette toward such a high-ranking noble, isn't it? I simply wanted to show proper respect to the prince now that he's found his resolve.*

"That's how you leave a trail of men in your wake," he added. "What a wicked woman you are."

"Don't make it sound as though I'm some sort of evil temptress! Anyway, something as innocuous as that isn't fodder for any kind of romance. He's grateful to me for offering advice that helped him find his path in life. That's all."

"I wonder."

My goodness, he is such a jealous husband. He doesn't even realize how cute it is!

"Do I need to tell you how much I love you again?"

He didn't reply for a moment, then said, "I wasn't trying to make a demand like that."

"Oho. Are you saying you don't need my love?"

“I certainly didn’t say that!”

A passing knight stifled a laugh as he saluted the Vice Captain. Maids in distant corners chuckled as well.

Lord Simeon cleared his throat and returned his expression to normal. This was so amusing that an urge to lovingly cling to him rose in me, but I feared this would hurt his broken ribs, so I restrained it and squeezed his hand for a moment instead. He turned to look at me, some surprise on his face. When I smiled up at him, he sighed and finally smiled for me.

We went outside and walked across the gardens, which were dyed in autumn hues. The weather was clear, but the wind had become rather cold. It probably wouldn’t be long before the leaves started falling.

Steeling my courage, I asked the question that had been on my mind for some time.

“You’ve been conducting the interrogation, haven’t you?” I asked. “How is it going with...with him?”

After Lord Simeon cut off the Silver Fox’s arm, he had received medical treatment right away, so he had survived. He had been put in a cell and placed under heavy guard, so in theory it was impossible for him to exact his revenge. However, the interrogation still involved meeting him face to face, so I couldn’t help worrying.

Lord Simeon hadn’t told me very much about it. Rather than an issue of confidentiality, it seemed to stem from his own unwillingness for me to hear about it.

He didn’t give much of an answer now either. “Forget all about him. He will never show his face before you ever again. I swear it.”

“He bears a far bigger grudge against you than against me. It’s you that I’m scared for.”

He shook his head and put his hand on my shoulder. “That man can’t do anything anymore. However much he hates me, he can’t do a thing.”

After repeating this, he didn’t say anything further. I could vaguely deduce the

meaning hidden behind the words. It was hard to imagine that the Silver Fox would give any straight answers under questioning. We probably also couldn't use him in a trade with Orta; that was too dangerous given everything he had said and done so far.

Which probably means... I see.

No matter how evil someone was, I didn't want to see their life treated lightly, but with him, there was likely no other choice.

Even if it won't happen right now, it won't be too long in the future either. By the time the war is over, I imagine.

After pondering a moment, I changed the subject and asked, "When will the war be over, do you think?"

"Quite soon," he replied decisively. "It won't last until winter."

Someone was walking toward us from some distance away. When my eyes met his, I nodded, and the man with the abundant goatee nodded back.

"The northern empire, Slavia, isn't moving," Lord Simeon continued as he watched the man approach. "The Ortan military leadership has been completely abandoned."

"Really?" I replied. "That's exactly what we wanted."

"Indeed. We have Prince Gracius in our safekeeping and the Holy Crown of Lorencio in our hands. Lagrange now has every justification for restoring order in Orta. If Slavia backs the military government instead, they'll have no way to claim that it is the just course of action."

The man's footsteps stopped. Lord Simeon stopped in place as well and faced the man's richly colored eyes.

"All about appearances, isn't it?" said Marquess Rafale. "Surely there's neither justice nor evil in war. In the end, it's nothing but a violent free-for-fall where might makes right." His voice held a hint of irony, but no censure.

Lord Simeon responded in kind, remaining unruffled. "That's exactly why appearances are so vital. If no one feels a need to present even a veneer of respectability, the world will plunge into hell. It would bring nothing but

misfortune for every side.”

“Even if it means placing a king on another country’s throne to suit our own convenience?”

“We’re not trying to turn Orta into a puppet state. The aim is for them to be a neighbor we can cooperate with again. His Majesty didn’t give the order out of unbridled ambition.”

The marquess agreed surprisingly readily. “I suppose you’re right.”

Lord Simeon has accused him of being indiscriminately critical, but I don’t think that’s the case. He’s an honest man with a keen sense of justice. If he thinks something is a good idea, he’ll openly admit it.

When the conversation faltered for a moment as both of them searched for their next words, a voice called to me from the direction of the building.

“Marielle!” came the cry from the beautiful Princess Henriette.

Her bountiful black hair fluttered in the wind as she ran over, kicking up the hem of her dress to a slightly improper degree. Her ladies-in-waiting chased behind her.

“Oh, good day, Prin—”

“Listen! Listen!”

Ignoring both my husband and the marquess, she threw her arms around me with such force that I almost fell over. A strange mix of a gasp and a yelp emerged from my lips. Without a moment’s delay, Lord Simeon supported my back to keep me steady.

“What is it?” I asked once I’d gotten my breath back.

“I’m finally going to meet him!” she exclaimed as merrily as a child. “Prince Liberto is coming! I’ll be able to meet him!”

The princess’s cheeks were flushed and her eyes were glimmering.

“What? What?! He’s coming here—to Lagrange?”

“That’s right! He wrote me a letter saying that everything is arranged and ready for him to make an official visit. He’s coming next month. I can meet him

at last!”

She grasped my hands and started squealing. It had been more than half a year since the engagement was arranged, so it was no wonder she was so excited about the prospect of finally meeting her fiancé. *I suspect it will be some time before she calms down.* The ladies-in-waiting watched her with strained smiles.

Marquess Rafale took the suddenly buoyant atmosphere as his cue to leave and departed with a light bow. Even though the princess was whirling me around, I nodded back to him, which he returned with a kind smile.

“I can hardly bear it! I’m actually going to meet him!” She cried out in joy. “I’m happy, but oh, what if he doesn’t like me? He won’t be disappointed when he sees me, will he? I’m so nervous, but so unbelievably happy!”

A visit from Prince Liberto? I glanced at Lord Simeon and his face turned sullen as though he’d had the same thought as me. *Will it really be just the prince visiting? Perhaps there will be a reunion sooner than we anticipated. Maybe next time he’ll finally tell me his real name. I’ve no doubt he’ll argue with Lord Simeon again too though. If so, my husband will be the one who ends up feeling upset even though I’m the one being teased. Never mind, though. I’ll be there to soothe my husband. I love him more than anyone else, after all.*

We exchanged a glance and Lord Simeon shrugged. Just then, the princess, unable to contain her excitement, hurled herself at him as well. Though he was usually so unyielding, this time he let out a yelp of pain and staggered back. Tears even welled up, to my surprise.

Panicking, I put a comforting arm around him. *That must have hurt. It was a direct hit against the area of his broken ribs.*

The princess’s worries took on an even more ridiculous tone. “What if he learns that I’m a woman who managed to take down a military officer in a single blow? He’ll hate me, I’m sure of it!”

Resting his head on my shoulder Lord Simeon let out an exhausted breath. “Perhaps your inability to calm down should be the first thing you worry about.”

“She can’t hear you,” I told him.

We smiled at each other resignedly.

There's more chaos on the horizon, so for now, let's enjoy some peace and happiness together.

Beneath the clear blue sky, the trees had started to change color as autumn gently and magnificently painted the world.

Since I met you, a year has passed and the seasons have rotated. The days have repeated like a dance that ever ends.

Hand in hand, never letting go no matter what, let's keep dancing, nestled close to one another forever.

The Musings of Alain Lisnard

At the age of twenty-one, Alain Lisnard graduated from the military academy and was assigned to the Royal Order of Knights.

Even if he didn't graduate at the top of his class, his scores were outstanding enough for him to rank among the best. In the military, even those of lowborn origins could climb the ladder and find success if their abilities and track record were strong enough, so both Alain himself and his family had high hopes for him. After joining the royal guards, he continued to work hard and had the results to show for it, and when he was twenty-five, he was appointed as the aide to the new Vice Captain, Simeon.

Although his superior officer had been two years above him in the academy, they were the same age. Simeon was the heir to a major house and was blatantly given favorable treatment due to this; when Alain was finally granted the rank of lieutenant, Simeon was already a major. This discrimination based on factors other than ability did rub Alain the wrong way to some extent. However, he bore no ill-will toward the man himself, and was actually quite happy to serve under him.

Anyone could see that Simeon was a man who knew everything, and who was so serious that people often appended the word "damned" in front of it. He never cut any corners when it came to work or training. In the face of his extraordinary physical strength, combat ability, and even paperwork skills, it was impossible to mock him as a pampered boy whose status was his only claim to fame.

Though Simeon did have an overly stubborn and inflexible side to him, he was a good superior officer who took proper care of his subordinates. He wasn't all business all the time either. When there was a need to show appreciation, for example, he paid for everyone's drinks. One way or another, the men all ended up adoring him. Under the new Captain and Vice Captain, the Royal Order of Knights was reformed into a well-organized military branch worthy of its name.

Serving under a superior officer who was strict but worthy of respect, Alain worked with pride as well, satisfied with his professional duties and working conditions.

However, for the past year, things had been somewhat different. A new arrival in the Vice Captain's life had brought out a rather different side of him.

"You must be freezing. You need to get straight to a warm room."

When the torrential downpour forced them to take shelter, they were greeted by a face that had become very familiar by now: that of Simeon's wife. She ran straight to him and started fussing over him, full of worry.

Alain sensed the jealous irritation of the single knights and also the sour feelings of those who had left wives or lovers behind at home. It was plain to see that she was head over heels for him, and that he, if anything, was even more infatuated with her. It was perfectly fine for the two of them to be happy, but having it rubbed in their faces was very grating indeed.

"I'm not nearly as weak as that."

Simeon's voice as he soothed his wife could have come from an entirely different man than the usual Vice Captain. Who was this person? It didn't seem possible that he was speaking with the same mouth that imposingly barked orders, gave harsh reprimands, and delivered briefings. This was a voice so sugary sweet that it made Alain want to clutch at his chest in pain. The knights around him were practically fainting in agony, they found it so unbearable.

When he looked over, it wasn't only Simeon's voice, but also his face that was thoroughly enchanted. He was a notoriously attractive man to begin with, and now he was practically overflowing with seductive charm. With the droplets of water trickling from his hair and chin, he was dripping with desire in the most literal sense.

His wife strenuously reached up and used her small, slender hands to wipe his soaked hair and cheeks. Simeon narrowed his eyes, looking as though he found it ticklish. Though it was probably done unconsciously, he bent down to draw his face nearer to hers and gently put an arm around her waist.

This makes me feel very uneasy. I'm too sober to look at it. Who in the world is this? Until last summer, I had no idea that my straitlaced superior officer, the demon himself, was capable of making a face like that. Can a man really change that much when he meets his special someone? Watching this, I can't understand how Marielle gets in such high spirits over him being "brutal" and "blackhearted." Admittedly he shows a demonic face to his enemies and his subordinates, but to her, he's as sweet as honey!

"Lieutenant," said one of the knights meaningfully. All of them urged him to do something with their gazes.

He shook his head. "I don't know what you expect me to do about it."

What can I do? There's nothing to be done. We just have to ignore it and pretend we saw nothing.

The men exchanged whispered complaints.

"Dammit. I want a wife too."

"I never wanted to see the Vice Captain looking so lovesick. I wanted him to be the proud, aloof knight forever."

"You're asking the impossible. The Vice Captain is still a man. He gets lovesick when a woman is involved just like any other. How can you blame him when he found such a young wife? She's so cute that you can't expect much else."

"'Young' is the word. She's practically a child. Don't you feel sort of like we're witnessing a crime?"

"Shh! If the Vice Captain hears you, he'll have your hide! Besides, I think it looks more like a lovely scene between a happy father and daughter."

"That's all a ploy!"

"You lot are asking to be murdered, I swear!"

Thankfully unnoticed by the happy couple, who only had eyes for each other, the men did what they could to get through this indescribably unsettling and frustrating situation.

Then a voice of salvation rang out. "Must you keep on with your newlywed lovebird act? I find it highly objectionable!"

Clearly finding it just as unbearable, the crown prince got fed up and shouted at the Vice Captain and his wife. Everyone applauded him in their hearts.

This prompted Simeon to finally remember those around him and move away from his wife slightly. However, Alain didn't overlook the brief indignant glare on his superior officer's face. *He shows such defiance even toward the master he's so devoted to. Just how deep does his love go?*

Was love really something that could change a person, Alain wondered? Seeing the beloved and respected Vice Captain fawn over a woman to this degree was complicated for Alain. When his wife wasn't around he was still the same demon as always, but the moment he took on the husband persona, it was hard to even look at him. It was an eyesore, a sorry sight, and a big nuisance.

Today, Simeon's husbandly visage was on full display again. He was frowning deeply as he watched a man talk to his wife.

"What a shame, though. If you weren't already married, I'd have asked you to join me in my great project."

Prince Gracius's remark didn't seem to rise to the level of romantic attachment. More likely, he was expressing some light affection for Marielle. It was frivolous conversation, not an attempt to woo her. Still, that alone was enough to set Lord Simeon on edge and make him brim with nerves over the fear of another man trying to steal his wife.

Alain didn't want to see it. He didn't want to see his boss in this state. It was amusing, though. There was also something delightful about a man frequently called a demon being at the mercy of a force called love that could not be driven back with any military might or ingenuity.

Simeon was such a brilliant man that it made him somehow unapproachable. He had never inspired a feeling of closeness as such. And yet, now everyone was looking at him like he was an ordinary person. They saw him from a far less distanced perspective, which included being irritated, amused, or exasperated at times. Without most of them noticing, the bonds among the men had been deepened.

Marielle was the one who had led the way to that. At first glance she looked like an entirely commonplace person, neither good nor bad, but she actually held tremendous influence. *Women truly are the greatest and most calamitous of all beings.*

Watching the two of them walk along the corridor looking romantic as ever, Alain decided he might buy some flowers on his next day off. *I'll go and see the girl who's been on my mind. This time I swear I'll work up the courage to ask her out.*

Afterword

To think that Marielle Clarac is on volume 7 already. Did you ever imagine it? Hello there! It's me, Haruka Momo.

Since the last volume was more relaxed and easygoing, this one goes in the other direction, with a huge focus on action and investigation. I wrote whatever I wanted and went a bit too far, so I was sure I'd get asked to make tons of revisions, but surprisingly I got the okay, so I kept going with it and this was the result.

I got to put Simeon into a lot of fight scenes, which was really satisfying. Accordingly, I asked for the cover illustration to be a bit different from the others so far, with Simeon at the forefront. Maro took on my request and drew him looking really cool. To be fair, Marielle looks absurdly cute as well, of course! Even if she's given up the prime spot, she's still the main character. Every time, I'm blown away by Maro's art and truly grateful.

Lutin also returned in this book. Even though he and Simeon had a common goal and were working together, their perspectives are still diametrically opposed, and they're romantic rivals, so they just can't get along. They acknowledge each other's strength, but that only makes them dislike each other even more. The two of them have ridiculous but deadly serious arguments on a constant basis.

In the initial planning stages, I actually had a very different plot twist in mind. Marielle was going to be the one who lost her memory. I changed my mind because it made the circumstances of the case too tangled and the story lacked coherence, but the change in direction resulted in the whole book being very serious. To make up for it, next time I want to go all out in writing wacky comedy. The war has reached a stopping point in this volume, so if there's a volume 8, I want it to be all about lighthearted chaos. In the process, I'd also like to bring back some characters who haven't been seen in a while.

As of this writing, the manga is making its way through the story of volume 2.

That's an era when Marielle and Simeon still aren't quite on the same page, so it brings back a lot of memories. There are differences from the novel every now and then, so it's both a familiar story and a brand new one. Even when it's a scene I know, it's presented in a way I would never have imagined, which is just so interesting. I'd love it if you readers all enjoyed both the novel and manga versions of the story.

The world is in the middle of a historically difficult situation that has made everything more of a struggle in one way or another. I can hardly express my gratitude toward the many people, starting with the publisher, whose efforts made it possible to release the book despite that. Also, from the bottom of my heart, I express my deepest gratitude to all of you who picked up this book in the current environment.

Thank you so much for accompanying me this far.

—Haruka Momo

July 2020



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The Holy Crown of Marielle Clarac by Haruka Momo

Translated by Philip Reuben Edited by Linda Lombardi

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Ebook edition 1.0: August 2021